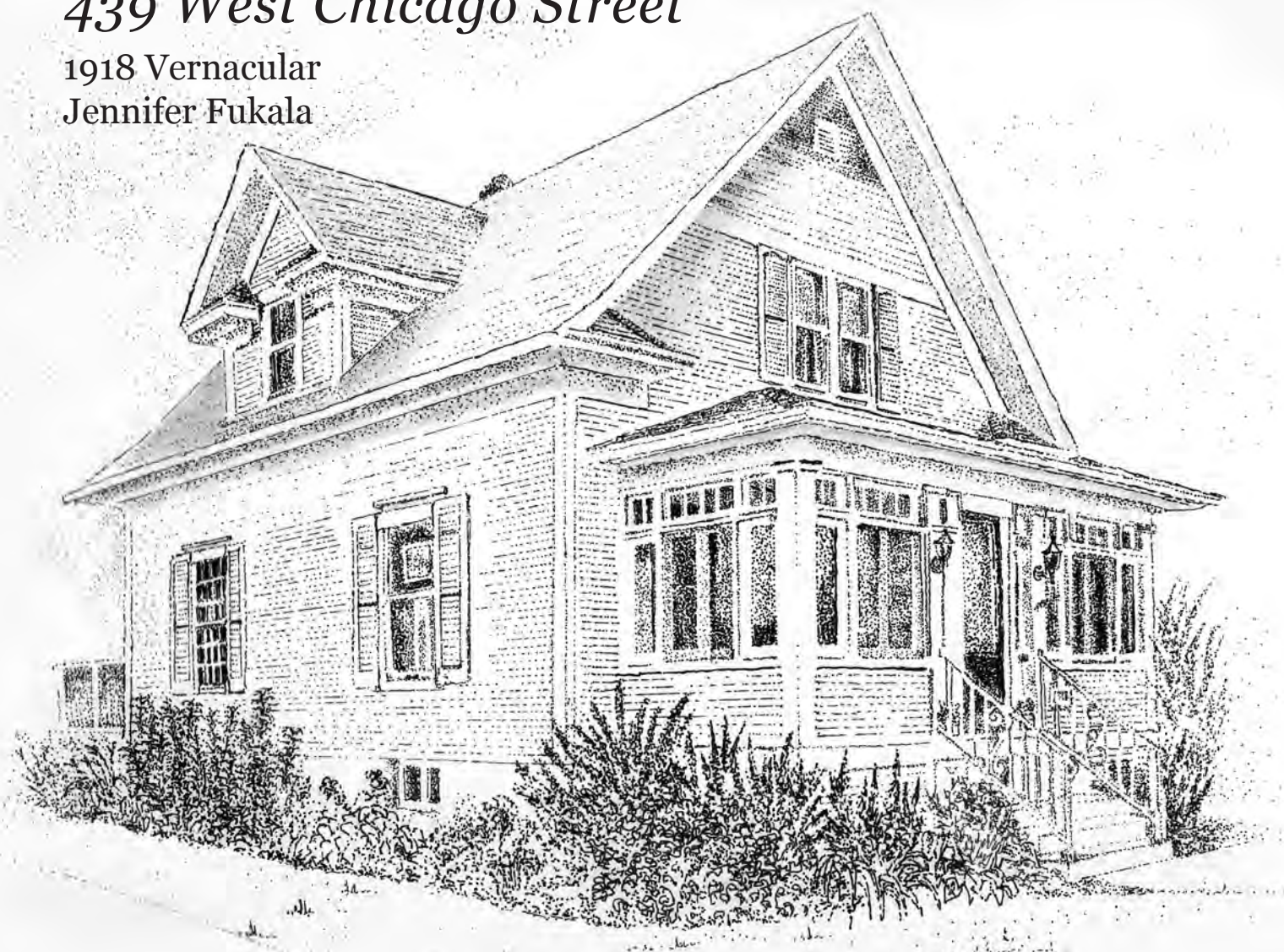




439 West Chicago Street

1918 Vernacular
Jennifer Fukala



As the city of Elgin rose from east to west, so did its neighborhoods. “West Elgin” came in 1843, just west of downtown and the Fox River. Bridge Street connected the city across the river and was later known as Chicago Street. The next west-side neighborhood was William C. Kimball’s Addition, west of Jackson Street between South Street and Chicago Street. Part of this area was named a County Clerk’s Subdivision in 1883. Charles Gromer of Hanover Township acquired several lots in this subdivision in 1917; they became known as Gromer’s Subdivision.

The neighborhood developed rather slowly, with just one house indicated on the 1913 Sanborn Map in Gromer’s Subdivision. Then World War I began. In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson ordered a building ban so the country could devote its resources to the war effort.

On July 20, 1918, Gromer sold the 439 W. Chicago lot to Henry A. Becker and his wife, Anna. Their children were Adelaide and Arthur. The deed to 439 lists the price as \$3,800, likely without a house; on Jan. 20, 1920, the Elgin Daily News reported that permits to build bungalows and two-story houses averaged \$4,000. The house was built in 1918, and the 1920 Elgin City Directory lists the Beckers at 439.

Henry was a carpenter and 29-year Elgin National Watch Co. employee. Late in life he moved to Hillcrest Nursing Home—which occupied the large house still at the northwest corner of Chicago and Jackson streets—a block from home. Henry died in 1947 at age 78. The couple was married 54 years. Anna remained at 439 with her married daughter, Adelaide Willey, and Adelaide’s husband, Clayton. Adelaide was a binder and 44-year

employee at Brethren Publishing House, publishing arm of the Elgin-based Church of the Brethren. Clayton was the publishing house’s chief engineer. By 1959, Clayton had died and Adelaide remained in the house, joining the church’s General Brotherhood Board in 1960. Adelaide died in 1965, ending the home’s Becker tenure.

In 1967, Gale and Juanita Puckett bought 439 and lived there until 1986. They owned Roll ‘N Donut, still on Elgin’s east side, for 25 years. The house then passed through several owners until Jennifer Fukala bought it in 2009.

Growing up in a newer house in an area with many older homes may make one wish for a greater tie to the past. Jennifer is one such person, and she found a match at 439 W. Chicago. She’d told her real estate agent she only wanted to see “houses built prior to 1930.” She grew up in South Elgin, attending school and church in Elgin. The agent complied, and Jennifer says 439 shone because “much of it is original and it was move-in ready.” Jennifer, operations manager for Medieval Times Dinner and Tournament in Schaumburg, also appreciated the schools nearby for her young son.

Jennifer says the major work she’s done at her house is in the yard, commenting, “It was a real jungle out there!” She’s had tree stumps removed, and cleared vines, poison ivy and thorny branches “sprouting everywhere.” She revived the lawn and removed snow fencing attached to the chain-link. In the living room, she’s restored the original plaster, removing five layers of wallpaper(!), added a decorative tin ceiling, and commissioned a custom stained-glass window for the original front door. Jennifer loves the ceiling-high French doors in the dining room, though they’re not original. Future plans include Craftsman-style stencils for the living room, and reopening the pantry now hidden behind the refrigerator.

She enjoys neighborhood living with nearby business she patronizes, including the Walnut Speak Easy, Golden Skillet, Gould Academy of Dance Arts, Collingbourne’s Antiques and Dairy Queen. She also likes Elgin Public House and Top Notch Tattoos in downtown Elgin. As vice president of the Near West Neighbors Association, Jennifer believes “one of our biggest assets as a neighborhood is our businesses, and we must promote them.”

Jennifer especially enjoys hanging out on the front porch with friends. She dreams of someday willing the house to her son with the intention of keeping it in the family, explaining, “The first family who lived here owned it for over 45 years. I want to appreciate and value the house like they did. The story of my house has gone on well before I was here and will continue long after I am gone. I am so honored to have become a part of it.”

Architectural Notes

This home is typical of those being built for working-class families in Elgin during the early 20th century. Despite its modest origin, it is visually interesting and rich in architectural detail. The prominent front-facing gable gives the building more height. The small extensions of the main roof on the front facade above the porch roof suggest a classical pediment.

The enclosed porch is a symphony of windows and textures. Small windowpanes form an accent ribbon above the larger single-pane casement windows below. The porch door with its side-light windows, brass hardware and vertical columns gives this entryway more stature. The porch’s columns offer a nice contrast to the horizontal siding. A simple two-color paint scheme brings out the trim details of the house.

When originally constructed, the house to the east was nearly identical to this one. Note how the wide-exposure aluminum siding, applied in a later remodeling, creates different shadow lines from the narrow-exposure clapboard siding used on this house.

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