

The Harley Clarke House  
2603 Sheridan Road  
Evanston  
Kris Hartzell

The Harley Lyman Clarke House is located at 2603 Sheridan Road in Evanston, Illinois. It is a 1920s mansion with an impressive profile and outstanding location that have caused it to be cited as notable many times since it was first built. Designed by architect Richard Powers, the property was enhanced by landscape architect Jens Jensen. After 22 years, it was sold in 1949 to a fraternal organization, and again in 1966 to the City of Evanston. The city failed to maintain the property and is now unable to support the structure.

Built of rough-faced limestone in the style of an English manor house, it incorporates many French eclectic elements. The steeply pitched roof is of Ludowici clay tile and is punctuated by six elaborate chimneys. The original home had sixteen rooms, including an iron and glass roofed conservatory on the south wing. Its entranceways are flanked with elaborately carved limestone flower sheaves with ornate copper scuppers and cisterns.

It is said that the house was the last of the large mansions built in Evanston before the stock market crash of 1929. Therefore, arguably, it is the last great house to be built in Evanston, since none have been built to this day. The building permit is dated October 15, 1926. The permit for the garage and coach house is dated March 24, 1927. Harley Lyman Clarke is listed as the owner. The architect was Richard Powers, The builder was Robert Black. Landscape architect Jens Jensen was hired to design the grounds.

In 1928, the Evanston Art Commission announced a new award for architectural excellence, beginning with buildings built in 1927. President and architect Thomas Tallmadge announced the awards, one for each of four categories, residence, apartment building, commercial and public building. Tallmadge said, "The art commission in this, its first series of awards, has stressed architecture...The city...cannot compel beauty. It has therefore in a way delegated to its art commission this extra legal function of making the city beautiful."<sup>1</sup> The Harley L. Clarke

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Tallmadge, "Four Beautiful Buildings", *The Evanston Review*, February 2, 1928

house was the winner of the residence award. It was featured on the front page of the Evanston newspaper on February 2, 1928.

Architect Richard Powers practiced in Chicago, lived on the North Shore and executed several large houses in Wilmette. Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1886, he had attended George Washington University. With no formal architectural training, he learned the trade working for architectural firms in Boston. There he had also worked for the supervising architect of the Treasury and then opened his own private practice.

Powers won several architectural honors in 1918 and 1921. He won the first prize in the Third Annual Architectural Competition held by the White Pine Monograph in support of building with wood in 1918. “The first prize of \$750 was awarded to Design No. 161, by Richard M. Powers...really wonderful adroitness and aesthetic feeling manifest in the rendering.”<sup>2</sup> The judges’ observations go on to note several characteristics that Powers later exhibited in his design of the Clarke House. “The author has shown an indifference, almost amounting to perversity, for certain economical considerations with regard to the number and construction of the chimneys and this almost lost him his chance of a prize.”<sup>3</sup> However, perhaps it was his ability to appreciate the importance of siting that caused Clarke to choose Powers. The judges further praised Powers’ winning design: “The house itself is simple, direct and logical. It...occupies its point of land as though it had a right there.”<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1920s, the U.S. Government became involved in a national advocacy campaign encouraging home ownership. The Better Homes for America movement encouraged standardization in building through organized competitions and exhibitions sponsored by the various building trades, federated art clubs and architectural organizations. Powers won two design awards in the “Own Your Own Home” competition of 1921. Ironically, given the size of the Clarke house, the competition was for small house designs.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

By 1926, Powers had relocated to Chicago, with offices at 7 South Dearborn Street. In 1927, he joined the Chicago chapter of the American Institute of Architects. He went on to design several prominent houses along the North Shore.

The builder, Robert Black, had offices at 122 South Michigan Avenue in Chicago, and lived in neighboring Wilmette. Black was also listed as mason and carpenter on the building permit.

Jens Jensen was hired in April, 1928, to design the grounds. Alfred Caldwell served as foreman on the project. Both men had previously collaborated together on Clarke's Lake Geneva vacation home, Clear Sky Lodge. Jensen and Caldwell designed the prairie stone grotto and pool on the southern portion of the property. The sloping dune, beach and lake are the natural components of the eastern. According to biographer Robert Grese, Jensen did not care for Power's design of the Evanston house. Jensen reportedly said to Caldwell, "It's arrogant. Cover it with trees; it becomes tame. We could live with it."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the house reflected the nature of its owner. Harley Lyman Clarke was the president of the Utilities Power & Light Corporation. In this capacity, he had become a wealthy man by establishing an extensive network providing electricity for the burgeoning market of lighting and electrical consumption. Clarke had a reputation for calculated business expansion. He had bought and consolidated several companies related to the theater business into the National Theatre Supplies Company. This included companies that supplied screens and seats. More importantly, he owned the International Projector Company, which controlled eighty-five percent of the movie projector business. This company had developed state-of-the-art movie projectors that incorporated the new sound equipment capable of handling the emerging technology of "talkies." Clarke was eager to buy into Fox Film Corporation. William Fox was not ready to share ownership of his company. However, Fox did sell Clark a fifty-percent share of Grandeur, Fox's company that was developing the new wide screen technology. Fox saw this wide-screen format as a hedge against the still incubating technology of television. William Fox had invested heavily in theaters and attempted takeovers of competing film companies. With the stock market crash in 1929, the business climate turned against Fox. In an effort to bail himself and his far-

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Grese, *Jens Jensen, Maker of Natural Parks and Gardens*, 99

reaching holdings out of financial difficulty, he sold controlling shares to Harvey L. Clark. Fox had mistakenly supposed Clarke would support him against competing interests seeking to take control of the company. But instead, Clark sided with interests opposed to Fox and on April 6, 1930, Fox was ousted and Clarke was voted President of Fox Films and Fox Theaters. In 1933, Clarke admitted that he had planned to subvert Fox and take over the companies. Film Daily wrote of Clarke “A regular he-man that can look one in the eye and say yes or no and mean it. The new generalissimo of the Fox forces is still this side of fifty and one of the youngest really big men in the country. Not unfamiliar with pictures of the show business and with no silly illusions...one of the biggest utility magnates in the country.”<sup>6</sup> As it turned out, Clarke was not able to save Fox. The film industry struggled in the first years of the depression and the Fox Company incurred severe losses. Harley Clark resigned after one year.

Harley Clark’s utilities empire suffered as well. In 1936 he resigned from the Utilities Power and Light Company. He was sued by creditors repeatedly over the next few years. A 1937 suit for bankruptcy for the company alleged Clarke had “falsified records, loaned large amounts to individuals and firms without security and conducted intra-company transactions among the 46 subsidiary companies to conceal the operations.”<sup>7</sup> An injunction was sought to restrain disposition of Clarke’s personal assets, including “luxurious homes in Evanston, Illinois and Lake Geneva, Wisconsin”<sup>8</sup> Two years later, Clarke lost the house in another bankruptcy action brought by Tower Door Company of Chicago. A headline read, “Harley Clarke’s Mansion Sold.”<sup>9</sup> The article went on to state, “The \$400,000 mansion of Harley L. Clarke, one-time multimillionaire utilities magnate sold at auction today for \$3,486...M. Martin bankruptcy trustee bid on the home...Attorneys said Clarke could retrieve the home by paying the \$3,486.”<sup>10</sup> Apparently Clarke did re-purchase the house, although title was held by his wife, Hildur Freeman Clarke. At one time, he offered it for sale. An undated lavish real estate brochure includes this description: “The Ballroom on the third floor offers excellent recreational facilities. It has sound motion picture equipment with two projectors and screen. Removable stage

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<sup>6</sup> Aubrey Solomon, *The Fox Film Corporation, 1915-1935*, p. 139

<sup>7</sup> “Harley Clarke is Sued for \$5,000,000, *Oelwein Daily Register*, 1937

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> “Harley Clarke Mansion Sold”, *Oelwein Daily Register*, 1939

equipment with curtain, footlights, flood lights, and scenery...Communicate with Owner H.L. Clarke”.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, Clark had incorporated his film industry business equipment at home, with his state-of-the-art media room.

The Clarkes sold the house to the Sigma Chi fraternal organization in 1949. The newspaper reported that “back taxes will be paid and the property restored to the tax rolls.”<sup>12</sup> The Clarkes moved to suburban Mt. Prospect. A few years later, Harley Clarke died in 1955, at the age of 73. Zoning ordinances had to be changed to enable the sale to Sigma Chi, as the property was zoned residential. The fraternity used the house and grounds for their national headquarters and a museum. Sigma Chi, after much public negotiating, sold the property to the city in 1963. The sale price was \$265,000. The fraternity was permitted to occupy the house for another two years, while they built a new building a few blocks away.

The integrity of the Harley Clarke house is still somewhat intact, particularly the exterior. The exterior, while suffering from deferred maintenance, still retains its original features. The stone ornaments are on site and could easily be returned to their original location at the front of the conservatory. The beautiful copper gutters with the two ornately articulated cisterns are still in place. On the interior, the oak paneling, carved oak molding, and paneled doors could be refinished. The Ludovici tile roof is intact; so intact, that the company referred to the house and roof in an advertisement in 2003. “Architect Richard Powers based his 1926 design on the timeless look of a 16<sup>th</sup> century English country house. He specified a durable, beautiful version of Ludowici’s Provincial tile to match the enduring beauty of the design.”<sup>13</sup>

The city was anxious to obtain the riparian rights to the property. The property was strategically located just north of the Gross Pointe Lighthouse. The 1873 lighthouse and its property belonged to the city, and its beach was part of the Evanston beaches system. To the north of the

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<sup>11</sup> Real Estate brochure, undated

<sup>12</sup> “Sigma Chi to Move Headquarters Here”, *The Evanston Review*, undated

<sup>13</sup> Ludowici Tile Advertisement, *Old House Journal*, December 2003

Clarke House was Lawson Park. Named for the longtime captain of Evanston's lifesaving station, it was located on the former Charles Deering property. Charles Deering, of International Harvester, had commissioned Daniel Burnham to build his house there in 1894. The city had acquired the property and razed the house in 1962. The Harley Clarke property would combine these three properties into 600 feet of lakefront parkland and beach. It would be the final phase of the city's program of beach improvements, including several other beaches, begun in 1956.

The Evanston Art Center signed a 15-year lease in 1966. The mansion was renamed the Evanston Center for the Arts, and related arts organizations were invited to rent space as well. Residential apartments over the garage and in the servant's wing would be rented out for additional revenue. The house had not suffered a great deal during the time it was occupied by Sigma Chi, since it was used for corporate offices, and not a fraternity residence. Prior to the change of occupancy, the local newspaper viewed the house with the Arts Center director.

"What could be better suited for a center for the arts than a three-story mansion, overlooking Lake Michigan, with a solarium as large as a tennis court, living room with plush carpeting, fireplaces in every room and oak paneling...few changes will be necessary."<sup>14</sup>

A greenhouse was added to the western façade of the coach house. It was designated for use by the Evanston Nature Center. The Evanston Garden Club tended the Jensen landscape. A driveway into the property was paved and widened, the forecourt enlarged, and an additional parking lot added to the north.

The Harley Clarke House is an Evanston Landmark. It has been repeatedly honored from the year it was built. It is representative of a significant period of our history, the last of upscale building boom of the 1920s. The house has an interesting story in the fortunes of the man for whom it was built. The Clarke House occupies a strategic location, next to a National Historic Landmark, the lighthouse, surrounded by parks and beaches.

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<sup>14</sup>James Harff, "Art Center Signs Lease for Sigma Chi Mansion". *The Evanston Review*, June 18, 1965, 106