



## Hidden Gem on Upper Mountain Avenue

CONTRIBUTED BY MIKE FARRELLY,  
MONTCLAIR TOWN HISTORIAN,  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW WANDER

**I T IS HARD TO PIN-POINT** the architectural style of this gem on Upper Mountain Ave. The mansard roofs give it a kind of Second Empire feel, but the rounded gables make it feel more rustic. Perhaps we can call it a French Provincial. You don't get the full visual effect when you are traveling along Upper Mountain Ave. because the house is oriented along the length of the lot. You only see the side from the street.

It is one of the newer stately homes of Montclair, being built in 1946 and has only had a few owners. It was built by Swen Randolphe Swenson and his wife Jean (Meritt) Swenson. I was always intrigued by Swen's description in the Montclair directories. He was called either a "cattleman" or a "banker"; sometimes a "cattleman/banker". With a little research, I found that he was indeed both. He was heir to one of the biggest cattle ranches in Texas: the SMS Ranch founded by his grandfather, Swante Magnus Swenson. Swen became the co-chair (with his brother) of the Swenson Land and Cattle Co. Actually, the SMS Ranch is a conglomerate of 5 ranches (all founded by Swante Magnus Swenson) that total 300,000 acres, and take up substantial portions of 12 different counties. For good measure oil was discovered on two of the five ranches.

To understand Swen better we have to talk a little bit about his grandfather, Swante. Swante emigrated from Sweden in 1836. He moved to Texas in 1850. He had been opposed to both Northern and Southern radicalism before the Civil War. He helped Governor Sam Houston try to avoid secession, but they failed. He inherited slaves from his wife's family, but felt the institution was morally wrong.

Unfortunately, he chose to sell all of his slaves rather than free them. His views on slavery and secession put him at odds with many of his fellow Texans. He fled with his family to Louisiana in 1863. He was uncomfortable with the way Reconstruction was

progressing and moved to New York after the war (leaving his land in the hands of various agents). He had had mercantile and banking interests in Texas as well as owning land so it was natural for him to go into the financial business with William Perkins. The Swenson Perkins Co. passed into the hands of Swante's sons and was renamed SM Swenson & Sons.

That company became the biggest depositor into City National Bank. In time Swante's son, Eric (Swen's father), became the CEO of City National Bank, which evolved into 1st City National Bank. Swen was a director of 1st City National Bank (which explains his banking interests). After a few more mergers

we now know 1st National City Bank as Citibank. Swen was commissioned as a Naval Ensign, during WWI. He worked with the Bureau of Steam Engineering in Washington, DC. His sons: Randolph and Bruce served with distinction in the Army Air Corps during WWII. Swen and Jean lived in quite a few Montclair houses before they built this one. Randolph and Bruce only lived in this house for a short while after leaving the service and before starting families of their own.

In about 1966 Mortimer and Mary Lou Fox became the owners of this house. Mortimer had an MBA from Harvard Business School and a Ph.D. in finance from Yale. His career was in finance, including a stint with the Federal Deposit Insurance Co (FDIC) in Washington DC. When Mortimer and Mary Lou lived in Montclair he was the Senior VP-Finance for the Schering Plough Pharmaceutical Co. in Bloomfield. He was the treasurer of the Schering Foundation and was instrumental in setting up a chair in pharmacology at Georgetown University. Mary Lou was very active in the Montclair Garden Club. She helped organize the Mille Fleurs (1,000 flowers) a gala meant to raise funds for the Montclair Art Museum in 1983. She was an avid supporter and "a friend" of the Montclair Public Library. She moved to New York after Mortimer passed away in 2001.

The next owners were also heavily involved in the finance world. At least, the husband, James R. Burritt, was. James graduated with a degree in civil engineering from Bucknell. He got an MBA from the Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell University. He grew up in Virginia Beach, VA where his father had retired from a career in the Navy. James moved around a lot. He lived in Houston for a while and married Jessica Marie Benyon. As couple, they moved around while he built up a resume in finance. They lived for a short while in Bermuda when he worked for XL Catlin and Trout Trading, multi-national investment firms. He came to New York to work for Merrill Lynch. When he and Jessica lived in this house he was the Chief Investment Officer at the Thomas H. Lee Capital Investment Group. He has continued to work on his resume since living in this house and is now the Managing Director of Alternate Investing for the Pacific Life Co. James and Jessica now live in Laguna Beach, CA. ■

**If you'd like to see more images of Montclair homes, they are featured in the book, *Stately Homes of Montclair*, which can be found at [Montclair Booksellers](#), several local libraries and the [Stately Homes of Montclair Facebook page](#).**