

French Provincial On South Mountain

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

THERE ARE TWO CHARMING French Norman style houses right next to each other on South Mountain Ave. They are similar and one couldn't be blamed for thinking that they are a "Mother/Daughter" pair, especially because one is smaller and sits behind the other. There may have been some of that thinking behind their construction, but the two were never owned by the same person. The larger house was built about 1878 by John T. and Imogene Weeks. Their three grown daughters lived in the house after the parents passed away. They were all active in Montclair civic affairs, but today's article isn't about them. It's about the smaller house. The daughters took on boarders after their parents died. It was assumed that they built the smaller house to accommodate more boarders. That isn't the case. Neither was the smaller house ever the carriage house. Older Montclair maps clearly indicate that the Weeks family carriage house was on the other side of the main house.



The smaller house, the subject of this month's article, was built in late 1932, or early 1933 by Frank W. and Irene Becket, on the property that had once been part of the main lot. Frank was born in Montreal in 1879. His father was a businessman but loved music. His father sang, played the piano and played the flute. Frank became an investment banker and always held on to his father's love of music. Frank joined the firm of N.W. Harris on William Street in New York City and stayed with the firm after it became Harris Forbes & Co. He became an accomplished pianist. He also composed. Several of his compositions were published by the Hamilton S. Gordon Company. In his early twenties, he started noticing that his hearing wasn't so keen. One day he answered the phone and couldn't hear on one side at all. Technically he had become 75% deaf. He despaired for some time but discovered a device developed by the Alexander Graham Bell Laboratory, which was founded by the inventor of the telephone and continued in the founder's tradition. Alexander had been a teacher of the deaf. The lab developed a relatively small receiver that could be placed behind a deaf person's ear. It transmitted vibrations to the inner ear through bones in the head. The vibrations were produced by a microphone and a small amplifier. Frank claimed that he could hear his compositions on the piano better with this device than when he had normal hearing. His story made the front page of the Montclair Times on November 29, 1935.

Irene (MacKay) Becket was also born in Canada. Her family moved to New York State. She and Frank married in Steuben, NY

in 1917. She was a teacher and on the Board of Trustees of the Brookside School from 1929-1949. The Brookside School is now the Brookside campus of MKA. It is somewhat ironic that their daughter, Anne, went to Stoneleigh College in New Hampshire since the founder and president of the college-owned the big house next door after the Weeks moved out. Once again that is a story for another time. The Beckets moved to 91 South Mountain Ave. in 1941 and stayed there for a couple of years. They moved back into this month's featured house in 1945. They stayed there until approximately 1949 when the Van Horn family bought it. Paul E. Van Horn and Eleanor Lanctot were both born in Monroe County, NY in 1908. They married, and moved to Springfield, Massachusetts; then to Rochester. They moved to Montclair around 1949 and chose to live in our featured house. Eleanor passed away later that year. Paul remarried. Paul and his new bride, Marion (Spruance Smith) Vanhorn lived at our featured house for a few years. They moved to Undercliff Rd. They had two sons: Paul E. Jr. and Peter. Paul Jr. became an orthopedic surgeon. Peter became a jeweler. Paul Sr. was in insurance. He ended his career as the chairman of the American Life Insurance Co. of NY. ■

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