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93 Moraga Way, Orinda

## Greening the (Pink) Old Yellow House

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Nelson approves of the makeover, too.

Work on the house is planned in two phases: Phase I, currently underway, included raising the house 24 inches above grade, constructing seismic shear walls in the basement, and building a new front entry landing. Raising the house was not difficult, said Wright, noting its weight was probably not much more than a truck-load of lumber. The original redwood shiplap siding will be removed and re-installed over an inward facing radiant barrier and three inches of rigid foam insulation. For now, Wright simply plans to maintain the existing plumbing, heating and knob and tube wiring.

During Phase II, Wright will focus on siding, windows and architectural features, and upgrade the electrical wiring. Double pane windows will hang inside restored original window casings. A second story bath will be built along the landing; a main floor bath will be cantilevered off the back. Wright is installing an energy recovery fresh air ventilation system plus a new integrated solar electrical skylight and entry canopies. All of this will bring the house up to Net Zero Passive House Institute US (PHIUS) standards.

Work on Phase I began in early May. Wright estimates the foundation work will take about a month and sid-

ing work should take another two months. He said the inside work will be "pretty easy," and expected the bulk of the project to be completed by September.

Muir Sorrick's 1970 *History of Orinda* stated ship captain Alexander Jenkins bought the home's 2.2-acre site in 1894. The local newspaper described the house he built as "a real commodious cottage." A goldenrod yellow paint, possibly the same color used by the California and Nevada Railroad, made it appear to be a railroad station house, but it was always a private residence.

It was said Jenkins liked the barn on his property, but not the house, which may explain why he sold it. Nelson said his father, Charles, bought the house from Felix Fazio in 1918. Back then it had no plumbing, gas or electricity. Charles raised his family there, and his widow remained until her death in 1966. Ezra Nelson lived in the house from 1924 until 1952, when he moved into the "cottage" next door.

Today the Old Yellow House sits on a half-acre lot, adjacent to the San Pablo Creek. Birch, cedar, oak and fig trees surround a single car garage.

A full basement was dug by hand in 1928; it later housed the home's only bath. Interior walls are pine; the second floor stair rail is redwood. The

second story is framed with 2 x 3 rough cut studs. The kitchen flooring is checkered linoleum; room-sized pieces of linoleum covered most other floors. Newspapers dating from the 1940s were layered underneath the linoleum to provide insulation. These were a bonus find for Wright, who said he will preserve and frame them to use as interior wall dividers.

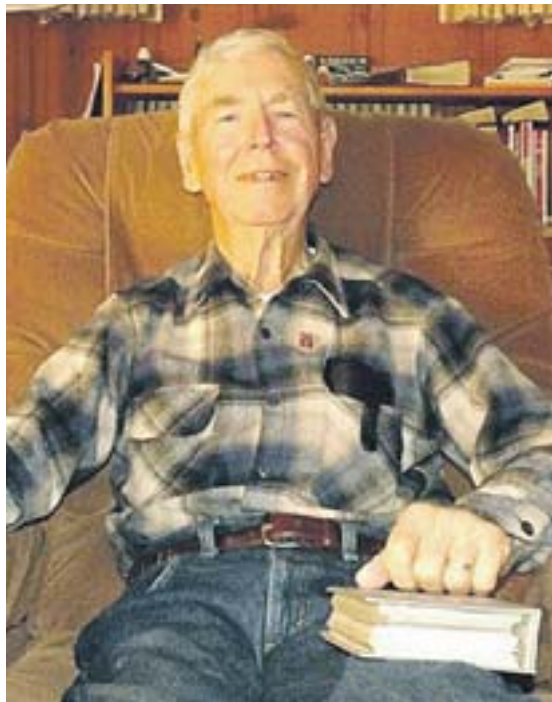
Wright calls the original framework "optimized framing." The spacing between each piece of lumber allows for more added insulation, he said. Wright intends to keep the second story close to its original condition, while restoring the main level and upgrading the basement to a "high tech" environment. The basement will house his home office and a working kitchen. Wright also hopes to highlight a portion of the original basement stone wall behind glass. He said his deep energy retrofit will act as sound insulation so most Moraga Way traffic noise will disappear. He'll install twin energy recovery ventilation (ERV) systems in the basement using an on-site well as a water source.

The Old Yellow House restoration project is being documented at <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?ref=wizard#!/NetZeroHomes>. Its changes might even make Alexander Jenkins smile.

## Keeping an Eye on the Old Yellow House

### A Former Resident's Reflection

By Cathy Dausman



Ezra Nelson Photos Cathy Dausman

Ezra Nelson is living local history. He's lived in Orinda all of his considerable years and he grew up at 209 Moraga Way – the home affectionately known as The Old Yellow House, although it's been salmon colored since Nelson's sister Mabel re-painted it in 1991.

"That paint didn't hold up too well," he says. Nelson is the youngest child of Charles and Karen Nelson, who bought the Orinda treasure in 1918. He lived in the house with his parents and four siblings, Clara, Clyde, Mabel and Earl. The family relocated from Albany to escape the Spanish Flu Pandemic that killed Nelson's brother Walter (Clyde's twin) when Walter was 18 months old. It was an eight-room house, and Nelson's "bedroom" was the up-stairs landing.

When the family moved in, the house had no heating,

no indoor plumbing, no gas or electricity. The front room was where the Nelsons could entertain visitors, but the family "spent their life" in the kitchen, the only room heated by the warmth of an old Athens wood stove.

Nelson still marvels at the breads, pies and preserves his mother produced on it. He also remembers the winter his siblings brought snowballs into the kitchen for an indoor, and presumably warmer, fight. For a while, there was a party-line crank telephone in the front hall, phone number CLifford 4487. That disappeared during the Great Depression when money got scarce.

Nelson says depression times were good and bad, easy and hard, but mostly he remembers the good. He remembers a barn where the current garage is, with a steeply sloped roof on the north, and an ad for "Bull Durham tobacco" on its side. The barn had no stalls but his family kept a cow and horse. It was an Orinda family farm, with "horizon [visible] everywhere," he says, of then-bare hills.

Nelson's mother carried two redwood seedlings from Oakland eighty years ago; young Nelson and his mother walked until they got to Old Tunnel Road. Then Karen called another son and asked for a ride – it was too dangerous to walk through the tunnel, he says. Nelson estimates those trees are 140 feet tall today; he built a bench beneath them commemorating the occasion.

Ezra is the last of his generation, and he's still keeping an eye on the old yellow house from where he moved in 1952. It wasn't far – in fact it was only next door, into "the cabin," still on the two-plus acre plot his family originally bought. He still thinks the Old Yellow House "has a lot of charm to it," and is watching the work being done by new owner James Wright. "I'm glad [Wright] came," says Nelson, who wants to see the work completed. "I hope I live to that time."

You can read more about life in the Old Yellow House online at <https://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0607/Growing-up-in-The-Old-Yellow-House.html>



Sign by the redwood trees in Nelson's back yard