

New Life for an Old House

A Community Legacy in National City

Iris Engstrand

Oliver Noyes of Franklin, a village within the town of Henniker, New Hampshire, was a friend of the Kimball family of nearby Hopkinton. Oliver's sister Sarah often visited Mary Kimball, Frank Kimball's sister, and the three of them attended church together on Sunday nights for a "sing."¹ Sarah Noyes assisted Frank's mother on occasion and the two families maintained a close relationship. While the Noyes family remained in New Hampshire, the Kimball brothers moved first to San Francisco in 1861 and then, for reasons of Frank's health, decided to settle in the southern part of the state. They finally chose San Diego County where Frank purchased Rancho de la Nación and founded National City in 1868.² Frank no doubt kept in touch with the Noyes family since they left New Hampshire for California sometime in 1893, after Oliver's businesses that occupied the Noyes Block were destroyed by fire in June 1893.³



Oliver H. Noyes house restored. It is presently owned by the International Community Foundation. Photo by Steven Schoenherr.

Iris Engstrand, Professor of History at the University of San Diego, frequently writes on local history and is co-editor of *The Journal of San Diego History* with Molly McClain. The author wishes to thank Richard Kiy, President and CEO of the International Community Foundation, National City.



Seated: Oliver H. and Mary Jane (Plummer) Noyes. Standing: Doris Rose Noyes, Duncan Patterson Noyes, Oliver Clarence Noyes, Rose Noyes (Gilcrest), and Oliver Stanley Gilcrest. Photo courtesy International Community Foundation.

Oliver Noyes, who planned to make Frank Kimball's newly incorporated municipality his permanent home, was named postmaster of National City on December 23, 1893.⁴ Noyes purchased a seven-acre lot at 2525 N Avenue and decided to build a five-bedroom 4,000 square-foot Queen Anne style Victorian home. A wealthy businessman, Noyes wanted to showcase an architectural design that had become fashionable in the 1880s and 1890s, when the industrial revolution was hitting its stride. New technology had made it possible for factory-made, precut carved woodwork such as stair railings, cabinetry and exterior trim to be ordered by mail and shipped across the country by train. Houses in National City were keeping up with national trends.⁵ The Noyes house was completed in 1896.⁶

The Noyes family home had sufficient acreage for a colorful garden and numerous trees. Oliver's wife Mary Jane (Plummer) was active in the Olivewood Club, a women's organization founded by Flora (Mrs. Warren) Kimball in 1898.⁷ Mrs. Noyes exhibited a large display of flowers at their first Rose and Carnation Show in 1912. By that time, Oliver had left his position as Postmaster and joined Colonel George Chase, also from Henniker, New Hampshire, in

opening a canning and pickling works in the old carriage factory building at 23rd and National Avenue. They soon moved to San Diego. According to reports of their shipments of guava jam, fig marmalade, pickles and vinegar: "Chase and Noyes" conducted a very profitable business. Most of the shipments went to Chicago.⁸

Mary Jane Noyes became president of the Olivewood Club in 1920 and lived in the house after the death of her husband on November 28, 1914.⁹ The house remained in the Noyes family until 1947 when their son sold it to Murvel (Bud) and Esther Newlan.¹⁰ The Newlans and their children lived in the house for nearly forty years and enjoyed its spacious grounds and ample living space. The Newlans' daughter, Janet Bower of La Mesa, witnessed the celebration of her sister's and brother's weddings on the front porch and attended numerous social gatherings in the main parlor, which the family called "The Green Room."¹¹ The Newlans retained one room with original furnishings from the Noyes family.

John Walton, son of Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton, purchased the house in 1985 from the Newlans. John and Christy Walton were impressed by its size and protected location, which would give their family privacy. Christy Walton described some of the improvements that had to be made:



Remodeling of Noyes house by John and Christy Walton in 1988. Photo by Christy Walton.

The front porch steps had fallen down, the back porch was sort of melting into the ground. The chimneys were broken off, the gutters were full of grass and rot as they were the original wooden gutters.... We floored both the dining and kitchen with maple floors from the first school in National City, we opened two small rooms, we created another full bathroom, we rebuilt the windows on the south side of the house, added insulation to the walls, and added two dormers.

We dug out the basement, it was simply a dirt hole with a lot of skunks in it. After that we attached the house to the foundation as it was simply sitting on it, like those in San Francisco were during the last big earthquake there. We added a steel beam to support the floors under the piano, and we made a wine cellar. I must say though, the whole house still moves during an earthquake.



The International Community Foundation organic garden. Photo by Steven Schoenherr.

Christy Walton planted and cultivated an organic garden for the health and pleasure of her family. Young Lukas Walton, who attended Harborside School in San Diego, learned the value of healthy eating habits while growing up in the house.¹² In 2006, the Waltons donated the property to the International Community Foundation

to establish the Center for Cross-Border Philanthropy. Currently the garden serves as a cross-border resource to promote experiential learning. In 2008 the produce was being donated to the UCSD Cancer Center.

The major goal of the Cross-Border Center is to bring together civic leaders from the public and private non-profit sectors both in the United States and Mexico to promote broader understanding of cross-border issues. The Center, in addition to cultivating the organic garden and using the latest in effective green design elements, serves as a model to promote good nutrition and encourage conservation of energy and water. It provides educational programs for local school children (K-12) to help them understand border-related issues. The historic nature of the house itself serves as a bridge to the past and illustrates the manner by which people lived with fewer modern comforts than are expected today.¹³



The Noyes house with the original carriage house on the left. ca. 1930. Photo courtesy of the International Community Foundation.

NOTES

1. Oliver Noyes, born March 4, 1837, married Mary Jane Plummer, born September 18, 1842 in Henniker, New Hampshire. They were the parents of Rose, Oliver C. and Duncan. Robert Oliver Noyes, Oliver H. Noyes Family History, typescript, International Community Foundation, National City. Irene Phillips, "In Old National City," *National City News*, December 5, 1959.
2. National City is the second oldest city in San Diego County. Incorporated on September 17, 1887, it was originally part of the 26,000-acre El Rancho de la Nación, which was purchased in 1868 by Frank Kimball and his brothers Warren and Levi. The Kimball brothers cleared lands, built roads, constructed the first wharf and brought the railroad to the City.
3. Oliver H. Noyes, who served as the Town of Henniker Representative to the New Hampshire State Legislature, owned the largest block in Henniker, and ran a general store with offices, apartments and a hall of the third floor. The stores were not rebuilt until 1914 after the fire in 1893 destroyed the eight businesses on the block. Oliver Noyes was named Postmaster of Henniker from 1885 to 1889. Robert Oliver Noyes quoting Cogswell, *History of Henniker*, pages 299-301, in Oliver H. Noyes Family History, typescript, International Community Foundation. See also Irene Phillips, *National City: Pioneer Town* (National City, California: South Bay Press, 1961) 3.
4. According to Phillips, Oliver Noyes' father was a Senator from New Hampshire who served during Cleveland's second administration. See "In Old National City," December 5, 1959. The first postmaster was Frank Kimball's brother George Kimball who opened the first Post Office in his house in National City in 1870. During the first year his salary was \$12.00—for the year.
5. The house took its place alongside the Boyd Ferguson House, the William Burgess House, the Villa Montezuma, and others noted for their Victorian features. See photo on page 175.
6. Anita Adams, "'Bit of New England' Brought Here in 1896 When House Was Constructed," California: Biography: Noyes, Oliver. National City Library; Mia Taylor, "Historic home, noble mission," *The San Diego Union*, February 9, 2008.
7. Olivewood was the name Flora Kimball gave to her home in National City. An avid gardener, her garden at 24th Street and F Avenue was known for its "profusion of flowers" and rare exotics. Her husband Warren Kimball built the clubhouse for the Olivewood Club on property adjoining his house near 24th and Highland Avenue in honor of his wife. This women's club, originally called the Tuesday Club, was dedicated to promoting arts and crafts; the clubhouse had an auditorium that seated 200. See Clarence Alan McGrew, *History of the City of San Diego and San Diego County: The Birthplace of California* (Chicago and New York: The American Historical Society, 1922) Volume I, pp. 385-389. See photo on page 171.
8. Irene Phillips, "Historian Writes of Col. Chase and Family," n.d. Chase Vertical File, *National City Star News* clipping, National City Library. Phillips, "In Old National City," *National City News*, December 5, 1959.
9. Robert Oliver Noyes, Noyes Family History, International Community Foundation Archives, National City. Grandson Robert Noyes lives in Santa Barbara.
10. Esther Newlan's grandparents, Harry and Jessie Clark, were long-time residents of National City. They were married there in 1914 and lived at 1032 Coolidge Avenue. They opened Clarks Feed and Paint Store on National Avenue in 1928 and the family operated it until 1955.
11. Letter from Janet Newlan Bower to Richard Kiy, July 22, 2007. International Community Foundation Archives, National City. Taylor, "Historic home, noble mission," *The San Diego Union*, February 9, 2008.
12. Harborside School in downtown San Diego closed its doors in 2007 for lack of funds. It was opened in 1996 on Kettner Boulevard at A Street through the philanthropy of John and Christy Walton. After that original gift ran out in 2003, efforts to raise more money to keep the school open failed and there was no alternative but to close.
13. Website for the Center for Cross-Border Philanthropy, <http://www.icfdn.org/initiatives/centerforcrossborderphilanthropy.php> (accessed May 25, 2008).