

THE SHERMAN-GILBERT HOUSE

"What a remarkable, indomitable lady!" exclaimed architect Richard Requa. He was talking about Gertrude Gilbert, who successfully organized a committee to "Save the Park Buildings" in 1933, after the City Council had voted to raze them. Thanks to people like Gertrude Gilbert, who helped to save them, and Richard Requa, who restored them, and public agencies which provided the funds, we can enjoy our handsome buildings in Balboa Park.

It is particularly appropriate that Gertrude Gilbert's house should be the subject of a similar cooperative enterprise between public agencies and private preservation groups. "What a remarkable, indomitable lady," we might say of the Sherman-Gilbert house itself. It is a remarkable piece of Victorian architecture, and (thanks to its many friends) it has proved to be indomitable, undefeated in its struggle for survival and a new life.

The original owner of the house was John Sherman, a real estate dealer, who built the house in 1887 during the great land boom of the 1880's. J. B. Stannard, the architect, exercised considerable imagination in the design of the house, which is a noteworthy example of "Stick-Eastlake" style. The house is built of California redwood, and is decorated with "stick-work" around the windows and doors. The large wall spaces on the sides of the house are enlivened with a variety of interesting patterns of fish-scale shingles, vertical siding, diagonal stick-work, and several fine examples of "Eastlake" decorative jigsaw patterns and sunburst designs.

The house was formerly located at the corner of Second and Fir streets, and was home to Gertrude and Bess Gilbert from 1897 until Bess died there in 1965, the last survivor of the Gilbert family. The Gilbert sisters were important contributors to San Diego's cultural life for many years, and this Victorian building was the center for their musical and artistic activities. During its latter years, however, it had begun to deteriorate, and by 1969 it was slated for demolition — to be replaced by a parking lot. Then the house attracted the attention of Robert Miles Parker, San Diego artist and Victorian-architecture buff. Parker nailed a sign with his phone number on the door of the abandoned building, demanding simply: "Save this House!" Soon the telephone was ringing off the hook, and SOHO

(Save Our Heritage Organisation) had been formed to raise funds to move the house. They organized imaginative art shows, tea parties, and a Victorian Gala. Meantime, the County of San Diego set aside land to be developed as a Victorian Park, and lent SOHO the remainder of the money needed to pay the moving costs.

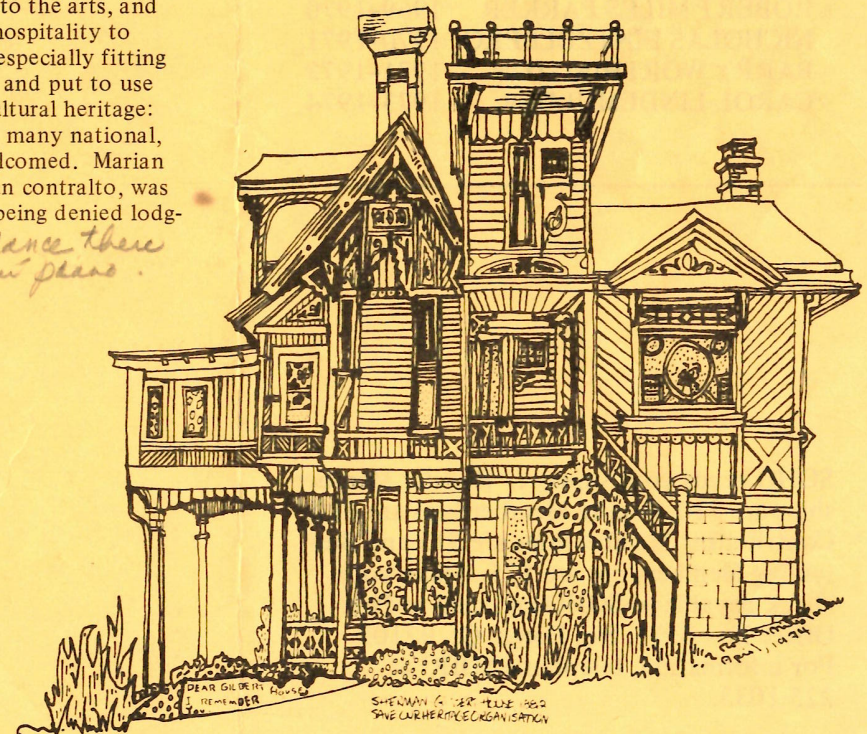
Finally in May, 1971, the Sherman-Gilbert house was lifted from its foundation at Second and Fir streets and trundled off to a temporary location in Old Town. Since then the County has received an Open Space grant from the federal government's Department of Housing and Urban Development. This grant, along with County funds, has provided for the establishment of "Heritage Park" in Old Town. The Sherman-Gilbert House has now been handsomely renovated as the first of a group of Victorian houses to be clustered in a "living museum" arrangement, in which old buildings will be put to new uses as shops, offices, or restaurants.

The Gilbert sisters are well-remembered in San Diego for their long-term devotion to the arts, and for their friendliness, warmth and hospitality to visiting artists and musicians. It is especially fitting that their house should be restored and put to use again as a symbol of San Diego's cultural heritage: this is a home in which artists from many national, ethnic and cultural groups were welcomed. Marian Anderson, the great Negro-American contralto, was a house-guest of the Gilberts after being denied lodging in local hotels.

*Pavlova danced there
Rubinstein played their piano.*

The renaissance of the Sherman-Gilbert House as the headquarters of the County Park and Recreation Department is one of the glittering successes in an otherwise often dreary and tragic recital of the efforts to preserve historic buildings. This is an inspiring example of the way in which public agencies and private citizens can cooperate in the re-cycling of old buildings for new uses, so that we can once again pay tribute to "a remarkable, indomitable lady," the Sherman-Gilbert House.

Clare Crane, January 1975



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S.O.H.O. (Save Our Heritage Organisation) was born in 1969 to rescue the Sherman-Gilbert house. Since then, SOHO has cooperated with the County Cultural Heritage Commission and the County Park and Recreation Department to acquire three other Victorian buildings, which will be moved to Heritage Park in 1975. Please join us in this endeavor!