

## **How Harbisons built, lived in their home**

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During recent days, one of the prominent houses in Vacaville has embarked on another chapter in its history. Harbison House has moved off its foundation to a new location as part of the Nut Tree redevelopment.

Harbison House predates the Nut Tree by nearly a generation. It was built in 1907 by Hester and Luther Harbison as a home for them and their four daughters, Edith Mary (then age 24), Julia Esther (age 22), Harriet Josephine (age 18), and Helen Melissa (age 13).

Hester Allison, youngest daughter of Josiah and Julia Ann Allison, married Luther Harbison in 1881. The couple purchased 30 acres along the wagon road bordering the east side of the Allison Ranch and started their own fruit ranch. Later they were able to acquire the Allison Ranch and move back into the house where Hester had been born and grew up.

By 1907, Luther and Hester's Ranch was a successful enterprise, allowing the family to build a new house. They chose George H. Sharpe, a well-respected local builder and a personal friend. He had built several utility buildings, such as a barn, for Luther in previous years. By then, he was also well known for his impressive homes along Buck Avenue and on other ranches.

Hester and Luther had very definitive ideas for their home and took a long time to design it. One of the interesting features is the way the house is laid out so as to catch any and all breezes, allowing for plenty of cross ventilation.

Their youngest daughter, Helen, who founded the famous Nut Tree together with husband Bunny Power, recalled in later years: "My mother and father designed the house and he (George Sharpe) built it. My parents were a long time considering the house, and they considered the climatic conditions. It gets awfully hot in the summertime, and the typical house that I went into in my youth had a long hall with bedrooms off either side of it so there would be no cross ventilation. My family built this big hall here, with all the doors and windows off it, so that at night, by opening them all, it cooled off pretty rapidly."

The hall she mentions is the central feature on the second story of the house. Five bedrooms and a large bathroom are arranged around the central hall. "When I lived in

the house, there was no furniture in the hall at all. It was simply used for cross traffic to the bathroom or from one of the five bedrooms to another,” recalled Helen.

One of the dominant features of the house is the front entrance with its massive columns and Ionic capitals which support the second-story porch. The Ionic capitals were created by a craftsman specializing in this type of plaster work. His name was Edward C. Power, of San Jose. His son, Edwin, nicknamed “Bunny,” eventually would meet Helen Harbison at University of California, Davis, and marry her in 1921. When Edward Power arrived at Harbison House for the wedding, he is said to have exclaimed: “I made those capitals. I remember shipping them to Vacaville to Mr. Sharpe.”

The second-story porch was one of the features the Harbisons wanted. Luther’s health had always been frail. He suffered from tuberculosis and would eventually die from the disease in 1921. At the time, fresh air was considered a major ingredient in treating tuberculosis. Consequently, Luther and Heather installed their bed on the upstairs front porch. They used this open-air bedroom year-round. Canvas tarps around the perimeter shielded them somewhat from the elements during the winter months.

The first floor was laid out with equal thoughtfulness. Visitors entering through the front door could easily divest themselves of their outer garments. A table with hidden basin, water, soap and towel allowed a quick removal of road dust before they were invited to enter the living room - the Harbison family did not like to use the term parlor. On the opposite side of the front hall was the music room, where Hester and the girls could play their beloved piano.

The dining room was situated at the rear of the house, reachable both through the living room and from the hallway. One of its eye-catching features was a built-in, floor-to-ceiling cabinet where the family stored all its china and silverware. One door at the rear led to a small office with an exterior exit. Here, Luther conducted all the ranch business. On paydays, his workers lined up outside the rear door to wait for their monies.

A second door led from the dining room through a pass pantry, filled with shelves and specially designed, built-in large platter storage, and from there into the kitchen.

Central to the kitchen was a large stove, its pipe going up to the second-story bathroom. When the stove was operating, the pipe would in turn heat water for a bath.

On the rear porch, the family stored its 1902 electric washing machine and other necessary items.

A smaller door led from the kitchen downstairs into a small cellar, which ran under half of the house. This interesting historic feature would be lost at the house's new location.

The main kitchen door exited back into the hallway. Right next to the stairway to the second story, allowing Hester and her daughters to whisk out of the kitchen, unseen by visitors, and to freshen up upstairs, before descending to greet them.

One interesting feature is a speaker tube connecting the kitchen and upstairs hall. Luther disliked the idea of having his daughters call down the staircase and asked for the speaker tube to be installed instead.

Visitors often commented on the comfortable feel of the staircase banister. It featured two different grooves, which let the hand slide along comfortably.

The main landing of the staircase featured a large intricate inlaid glass window. George Sharpe was known for always installing a surprise in each house he built. At Harbison House, this was the large glass window on the landing and the two flanking glass windows at the front entrance. The Harbisons had designed the big landing window and looked forward to the day they could admire their orchards through it. According to family tradition, they never had the heart to tell Sharpe that his lovely gift spoiled their original intent.

Building the house was a large undertaking that was discussed with various members of the family. On Sept. 3, 1907, Hester's niece, Jesse, daughter of Hester's sister, Harriet Allison Mansfield, sent a postcard from her travels to Cologne, Germany. On it, she wrote, "Here I am and I can hardly believe it, but have not time to 'pinch myself' for there is so much to see in this country. This card shows all of the old gates to the city. The Cathedral here is a beautiful Gothic building and the city very pretty. Hope your house is well along. Jessie"

As with all purchases, Luther also recorded the house construction in his ledger under "New House." The curt entry reads: "Built in summer of 1907 by G. H. Sharpe, Contractor & builder, Contract price \$6000." This is followed intriguingly by "Extras \$732.55," quite a large sum at the time. Speaker tube and special woods for the staircase may well be included in the "Extras."

The Harbison family never employed many indoor servants, but rather did all the work themselves. This included cooking not only for the family, but also for many of the ranch workers. When one remembers that the immediate family already had six members, Helen's following memory quickly becomes impressive:

"We had one couple that always lived on the ranch, and when I was very little, we had

neighbors that used to work on the ranch and my mother always boarded them. Then, when the harvest people came to harvest the grain in the back, they usually brought a cook wagon with them. There were, I think, a few times when they didn't have a cook wagon, and my mother would have to feed the whole crew, but that didn't happen very often. ... They all came to the house. We had a big dining room and they would eat at different hours from the rest of the family, whereas if we just had five or six people working on the ranch, they'd sit down and eat with the family. ... The only people she ever boarded were neighbor boys that used to work for us. They would stay and sleep here and yet they didn't live too far away. But in those days, if you walked three miles, why, then you couldn't work as well."

Eventually, daughter Harriet married in 1917 and moved away. Young Helen married Edwin "Bunny" Power in 1921, shortly followed by Luther's death. That same summer, the young couple started the enterprise that eventually would grow into the Nut Tree.

Only Hester, Julia and Edith continued to live in Harbison House. All three worked at the Nut Tree, Hester mainly in her own kitchen, Julia and Edith in the growing dining room of the Nut Tree. Much of the early Nut Tree products, such as the famous fruit confections or the equally famous chocolate cake, were originally created around the kitchen table at Harbison House.

After Hester's death in 1953, Edith and Julia continued to live in Harbison House. Both sisters never married, taking an active role instead in helping raise Helen's and Bunny's children.

Bunny Power, Edith, and Julia died within a few months in 1969. Stunned by this triple loss, Helen threw herself into recreating Harbison House as she remembered it. She and her son, Bob Power, were able to acquire the estate of Dixon resident and old friend, Helen Fountain Bailey. Much of the Fountain home furniture reminded Helen of the furniture she grew up with. From this estate and other purchases, she created Harbison House as a house museum.

Today, both Harbison House and its contents have been donated to the Vacaville Museum by the Power family. With its relocation, the beautiful old house can look forward to a new life, telling the story of the Harbison and Power family, of fruit ranchers and Nut Tree memories.

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