

Sandwiching in History
S. A. "Gus" Lane House
3617 Ridge Road, North Little Rock
October 3, 2014
By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the "Sandwiching in History" tour of the Gus Lane House. I'd like to thank Jason and Melanie Turner for allowing us to tour their beautiful home!

For any architects in the audience, this tour is worth 1 hour of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. See me after the tour if you're interested.

Built in 1925, the Gus Lane House is located in the Park Hill Historic District, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2000.

Park Hill: NLR's First Suburban Development

The Park Hill housing development, which now encompasses more than 1,600 acres, was the **brainchild of businessman Justin Matthews, Sr. (1875-1955).**

Justin Matthews, who was born in 1875 near Monticello, Arkansas, moved to Little Rock in 1901, the same year he married Agnes Somers. Prior to his marriage, Matthews, who had a pharmacy degree, owned and operated three drug stores in southeast Arkansas. Agnes Somers Matthews, who was also from a prominent family, urged her new husband to take a job selling cotton oil mills over a four-state area for a company based out of St. Louis. Matthews got rid of his drug stores and began selling cotton oil mills. He enticed clients to buy a mill by investing his own 10 percent commission in the venture. In 1902, Matthews, himself, opened the Rose City Cotton Oil Mill, promoting development in the community east of downtown NLR. After about four years in the business, Matthews had sold 88 cotton oil mills and decided to sell his stock, earning him upwards of \$1 million (he was only in his late 20s at the time).

About 1908 Matthews began to invest in real estate, acquiring land on both sides of the Arkansas River. He realized the potential for residential growth in North Little Rock, so he diligently worked to make the north side of the river easily accessible and more desirable. The north side of the Arkansas River was low-lying and swampy, streets were unpaved, and there was no drainage or sewer system. Water usually stood on the streets after each heavy rain, making them impassable for automobile traffic.

Matthews spearheaded the plan to create improvement districts in North Little Rock to fund the paving of city streets in 1913 and the construction of a drainage and sewer system in 1914. He also served on the Broadway-Main Street Bridge Commission beginning in 1917, which ultimately constructed the Broadway (1923) and Main Street (1927; since replaced) bridges to replace an older bridge that could only accommodate one vehicle at a time. Matthews also pushed for the construction in 1927 of a new viaduct over the railroad tracks between 8th and 13th streets in North Little Rock. It was no accident that the Ark-Mo Highway (now John F. Kennedy Boulevard/Hwy. 107) was one of the first paving projects undertaken by the state highway commission. Governor John Martineau appointed Matthews to the commission (1927), and the highway just happened to be the main thoroughfare through Park Hill.

Park Hill was the **first major suburban development in North Little Rock** and the **second development in the Greater Little Rock area**—Pulaski Heights was the first (platted in **1892; took off in 1903 with the streetcar**). Matthews **platted the first sections of Park Hill in 1921 and began selling lots in 1922**. Even though Park Hill was the LR area's **second** major suburban development (after Pulaski Heights), it was the **first to rely solely on automobile transportation** (Pulaski Heights developers also relied on a streetcar system). Park Hill was advertised as the "**second Pulaski Heights,**" but with more advantages like **closer proximity to downtown** Little Rock and North Little Rock, **greater elevation** (which provided cooler temperatures and health benefits), **better views,** and **level land**.

His advertisements even mentioned the fact that the roads leading to Park Hill ran north-south, so you **wouldn't have to face the sun** going to and from work like you would if you lived in Pulaski Heights (located west of downtown LR).

Matthews formed the **Park Hill Land Company** to market, sell, and develop the area, while the Justin Matthews Company would extend his developments to other parts of central Arkansas (including Sylvan Hills—now in Sherwood, Westwood—in southwest LR, and after WWII, Lakewood—just north of Park Hill). At its peak, the Justin Matthews Company **employed over 200 people**, including an **architect/builder (Frank Carmean), brick mason (Julius Bender), horticulturist/landscape artist (Oscar Wilhelm), and road construction engineer (Robert Massey)**. The company even operated a woodworking plant in order to finish raw lumber with minimal waste and crushed its own stone for construction projects. The company's motto was "To Build to Endure the Ravages of Time."

In order to make the area more attractive to families with young children, Matthews built Park Hill Elementary School in 1924-1925 and gave it to the NLR School District. By 1927, more than 200 houses had been constructed in Park Hill. The Great Depression slowed construction in Park Hill during the 1930s, but residential development increased during the 1940s—first because of men being stationed at nearby Camp Robinson for training during WWII, and then after the war when the soldiers came home. North Little Rock annexed Park Hill in 1946.

3617 Ridge Road

Most streets in Park Hill were laid out in the traditional grid pattern, except for those which ran along the edge of a hill. Ridge Road, so named because it runs along the ridge of a hill on the west side of the neighborhood, is a curvilinear street with irregularly-shaped lots. These lots comprised some of the most picturesque parts of Park Hill, offering homeowners a view of downtown or the mountain ranges to the west. In fact, when this house was completed in 1925, it was touted as having a mountain view. A photo of the house appeared on the real estate page of the *Arkansas Gazette* on May 17, 1925, and included the following information:

“This Beautiful New Home is One of the Many Built Recently in Park Hill, Popular North Side Addition. This residence of Mr. Gus Lane...is of hollow tile construction, stuccoed in Spanish Mission style with red tile roof. It is located on Ridge Road and has a wonderful view of Pinnacle Mountain. Mr. Lane is manager of the Bell Telephone Company for Arkansas.” [AG 17 May 1925, p. 19]

“Period Revival” styles were very popular in the 1920s, incorporating elements of the romantic styles of the past. This house was designed in the Spanish Revival style of architecture with a tile roof, stucco walls, arched door openings, and a tiled front patio. The home features three sets of French doors, all providing access to the patio.

Occupants

Gus Lane (1925 to 1939)

The first person to own and occupy the house was Gus Lane. Shepard Augustus “Gus” Lane was born on January 23, 1880, at La Grange, Georgia, to Robert Ridley Lane and his wife, Mary Jane Bradford Lane. Gus was educated in the La Grange public school system and attended college at the Georgia School of Technology (now Georgia Tech). He got a job with Southwestern Bell Telephone Company and

quickly rose in the ranks. Lane was chosen to serve as manager of the Model Exchange during the Pan-American Exposition of 1901 at Buffalo, New York, where he installed the second battery-operated switchboard used in the United States. The switchboard was connected to 1,000 telephones during the Exposition, which ran from May 1 to November 2, 1901.

Lane remained in New York until 1912, managing telephone exchanges for Southwestern Bell and later working for the Federal Telephone Company as district manager for central New York. In 1912 Lane took a job in St. Louis with Southwestern Bell. In 1914 he was transferred to Little Rock as division commercial superintendent for Arkansas, and in 1920 he was promoted to serve as general manager of Arkansas for the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company.

According to his 1918 draft card, Mr. Lane was 6' 2" with a stout build, and had blue eyes and brown hair. Lane married Susanne DeLafayette in 1904 at Buffalo, New York, and the couple had a son, Robert Augustus Lane, born in 1918. A little more than a year after this house was completed, Gus and Susanne Lane divorced (final on Sept. 1, 1926), and she moved away with their son, Robert.

1929 was a big year for Gus Lane. He married a woman named Helen, who was 20 years his junior (he was 49 and she was 29). He had previously organized the Southwest States Telephone Company and in 1929 bought the Russellville telephone exchange. And he bought the Gleason Hotel at 216 W. 2nd Street in Little Rock. The Gleason Hotel sat at the northeast corner of 2nd and Center streets where the Stephens building is today. In 1929 the 4-story hotel offered 106 rooms, with rates starting at \$1.50 per night. Lane owned the hotel for just a few years; it was under new ownership by 1935.

The detached garage is original to the property, and a portion of it served as living quarters for Ella Brown, who appeared with Gus and Helen Lane at this address on the 1930 Census. Ms. Brown was listed as a servant/housekeeper. She was a 50-year-old, African-American woman and was widowed.

Gus and Helen Lane lived in this house until about 1939, when they moved to Russellville. While in Russellville, Gus Lane was owner and president of the Western Arkansas Telephone Company, which operated telephone exchanges in 16 Arkansas River Valley towns. Gus Lane died in 1958 in Russellville at the age of 78. At the time of his death, he was still president of the Western Arkansas Telephone Company. According to his obituary, he was a past president and director of the Arkansas Independent Telephone Association; director of the United States Independent Telephone Association; and one of 12 advisors to the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) in Washington, D.C. Lane was also a charter member of the Little Rock Rotary Club (chartered in 1914). He was buried at Rest Haven Memorial Park in Russellville.

Leay Prideaux (1940 to 1957; widow remained until 1962)

In 1940 the house at 3617 Ridge Road was purchased by Leay W. Prideaux and his wife, Beatrice Mashburn Prideaux. Leay Willard Prideaux was born on February 10, 1902, at Arlington, Iowa, to Willard D. Prideaux and his wife, Emma Sorensen Prideaux. Leay and Bea moved to North Little Rock about 1933. He and his wife, Beatrice, had two children, Marie and Jean Paul. Mr. Prideaux made his living in the cotton industry. He served as manager of the Dominion Textile Company at 223 Cumberland in Little Rock and later became vice president and resident manager of the Howard Cotton Company, which bought out Dominion Textile in the early '40s.

Throughout his career, Prideaux served as president of the Arkansas-Missouri Cotton Trade Association; president of the Little Rock Cotton Exchange; and director of the American Cotton Association. About 1954 Prideaux started working with the Howard Cotton Company's Dallas office, in addition to his duties in Little Rock. He traveled extensively in Mexico and in Central and South America buying cotton for the company.

During one of his trips to Dallas, Prideaux suffered a heart attack and died ten days later on January 1, 1957, at the age of 54. He was buried at Roselawn Memorial Park in Little Rock.

After her husband's untimely death, Beatrice Prideaux remained at 3617 Ridge Road and had a few different jobs. She worked as a typist for the Independent Life Insurance Company for about three years; as an office secretary for the American Mortgage Service Corporation for about a year; and as assistant teller at Arkansas Savings & Loan for a year. She sold the house in 1962.

1960s

Physician James A. Pitcock and his wife, Cynthia, purchased the house in 1962. They lived here for a couple years, and then rented the house until about 1968. Their tenants during the '60s were Carter N. Brunk (USAF) and his wife, Penny; Fred W. Lawley (USAF) and his wife, Mary; and Bob Combey (construction worker and salesman at Acme Brick) and his wife, Cisi.

Jerome Climer (1969 to 1972)

Jerome F. "Jerry" Climer and his wife, Mary Ann, occupied the house from 1969 to 1972. Their two children, Greta and Matthew, were born while the couple lived in this house. Although he was never elected to public office, Jerry Climer was very active in the Republican Party of Arkansas, serving as director of finance for the party in 1969 and as campaign manager for Win Rockefeller in 1970 (lost the gubernatorial race to Dale Bumpers). At the end of his second term as governor, Rockefeller appointed Climer to serve as Pulaski County Clerk. Climer served as county clerk from 1970 to 1972, when he vacated the post to run for Secretary of State. He lost the election to Kelly Bryant. Climer later became successful as a public policy and information expert hired to advise governmental, media, and private-sector organizations. He founded two think tanks, The Congressional Institute and The Public Governance Institute, in 1987 and 2001, respectively.

Donald D. Asmussen (1973 to 2004)

Donald D. Asmussen and his wife, Jackie, lived in the house from 1973 until about 2004. In the late '70s and early '80s, Mr. Asmussen worked for Haynes Construction Company. In 1985 he and his wife were listed in the city directory as singing telegram workers.

Renovation and Recent Owners

The house was purchased about 2004 by Roger Monkus and Donna Shelton, who did a substantial renovation of the home, which had deteriorated due to deferred maintenance. During the renovation, a large hole in the floor of one of the back rooms was repaired with flooring from another house in Park Hill, so it matches perfectly.

In 2005 Brett and Stephanie Madison bought the house. They finished out the partial basement and added a full bathroom downstairs.

In June 2012 Jason and Melanie Turner bought the home. Interestingly, when they looked at the house in 2012, it was advertised as having a “mountain view.” And you can still see Pinnacle Mountain from the highest point in the driveway, especially during the fall and winter months. The Turners recently built a deck on the back of the house and poured a new concrete driveway.

Details

- About 2,700 square feet
- Original wood floors
- Most original windows, some with wavy glass
- Most original door hardware
- 3 sets of French doors, 2 of them are set into an arch
- 2 bedrooms and one full bath on the main floor (all connected; Jack & Jill)

- Old sleeping porch at the back of the house, now enclosed with windows
- Butler's pantry between the kitchen and dining room features an original built-in cabinet
- Part of the hardware for a call button remains in the dining room floor under the table. You could sit at the table and press the button with your foot to summon "the help."
- Old phone jacks throughout the house
- Coal chute on the north side of the house
- Ceiling tile in the dining room is NOT original
- The Turners have a piece of the original dining room wallpaper.
- There is evidence of a terraced garden behind the house. A stone retaining wall is just beyond the back fence, and steps lead down from the Turner's yard to a lower level. They actually own the wooded land just beyond their back fence, but it is not cleared.

Questions?

Next tour is November 7 at the Roundtop Filling Station, Trammel & Roundtop Road, Sherwood.