## HISTORIC RESOURCE EVALUATION to California Register criteria, of 12355 STONEBROOK DRIVE, LOS ALTOS HILLS



Top photo: The house during the 1910s. Bottom photo: The house today.

by

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### Summary

The subject house was built in 1909 or 1910 by a San Francisco industrialist and businessman named Percy Morgan as a residence for his retired parents, George Cosmo Morgan and Laura Morgan. At a later, unknown date the house was greatly altered in appearance, resulting in a new covering of wide wooden shingles, changed fenestration and entrances, and the removal of oriels from the end bays. Though no documentation of the alterations can be found, they were probably made by William Simrell, Jr., an architect who owned and lived in the house, and who played a leading role in the movement to incorporate Los Altos Hills during 1954-1956. It remains uncertain whether Simrell altered the house when he purchased it in 1949, when he repaired fire damage to the house in 1961, or at another time.

William Simrell, Jr. was important in the movement to incorporate Los Altos Hills during the mid-1950s. Because it remains uncertain whether he altered the house before or after the years he worked on Los Altos Hills incorporation, it is difficult to say that this house is eligible for the California Register because of its association with him. It also does not appear to be eligible for its history or design. Please see the Evaluation section, below, for more detail.

### Description

#### Site and grounds

This residence is located at the west end of Oneonta Drive and can also be reached by a parallel "Lane" that shows on early subdivision maps. Although the property has an address on Stonebrook Drive, it does not actually front on that street. Historically, the property was considered to fall within the Oneonta Hill Subdivision of N. J. Stone's Subdivision of the San Antonio Rancho. As is true throughout Los Altos Hills, the neighborhood is semi-rural in feeling. Lots range from one acre to about four acres in area. The terrain is gently rolling, and houses are typically surrounded by trees and lawns.

The subject property consists of a single-story house on a 3.82 acre lot. Besides the house, two structures can be found on the lot: a carport northeast of the house and a shed to the north. The mostly-open carport is clad in large, painted wooden shingles similar to those on the house, while the shed is clad in rough, unpainted horizontal wooden boards.

#### Landscaping consists of:

Paved driveways along the east and north sides of the house. These driveways connect with each other.

A large, mature oak tree set in a small grassy circle between the house and the carport.

Orange brick paving adjacent to the east entrance. This paving fills a small rectangular area.

Orange brick paving adjacent to the west entrance. This paving fills a very large horseshoe-shaped area and surrounds a mature oak tree. This paved area was probably created in 1972 and according to the current owner was certainly in place by 1977.

Low hedges planted adjacent to the house on its west side.

An elevated wooden deck that surrounds another mature oak and is attached to the house's south addition.

A kidney-shaped swimming pool to the southwest, and an adjacent wooden deck. This swimming pool was built in 1972.

Extensive lawns on sloping land to the west.

Of these, the orange brick paving on the west side of the house, the swimming pool, and the lawns to the west are the dominant landscape features.

#### The house

The house is one story in height, is rectangular in plan, and is wood-framed in construction. The main body of the house was built in 1909 or 1910, while a rectangular addition on the south side dates to more recent decades.

The house is clad on all sides by wooden shingles that are painted gray. These shingles are much wider than the cedar shingles that are commonly found on Shingle and Craftsman style houses of the 1890s-1910s, and that covered this house when it was first built. Instead, the present shingles closely resemble wide shingles that were sometimes used in the Bay Area on suburban houses during the 1940s-1950s. Like other shingles of the 1940s-1950s, these are lightly textured with vertical grooves that were carved during the milling process.

Only the base of the house is not clad with shingles. At most places the base is covered with rustic siding, while at the south addition the base is covered with v-groove siding.

The roofline is complex. The main body of the house is covered by a shallow-pitched roof whose ends are hidden by intersecting gabled roofs that cover the house's end pavilions. These gables have very broad eaves, are faced with plain bargeboard, and are supported by projecting purlins with pyramidal ends (on the east and west sides) and

rafters (on the north and south sides). A shed dormer projects from the center of the roof on its west side. Except for the dormer and the purlins, which are both additions, this roofline fairly closely resembles a photograph of the house that was taken in the 1910s. In fact, it is the only visible part of the house that may date to that time.

All windows and entrances are wooden, except for one, namely an aluminum door in the south addition that opens onto a deck. The other openings are described below.

On both of the long facades — the east and west sides — entrances are centrally placed and either flank, or are flanked by, windows of the same height as the entrance doors. These window and door compositions project slightly from the rest of the house and are roughly twenty feet in width. They form almost solid expanses of glass, interrupted only by wooden framing and muntins. On the east side, which may be considered the front of the house because of its proximity to a driveway, a large central window is flanked to either side by paired doors, each of which is divided by muntins into four lights. On the west side, centrally-placed paired doors are flanked by windows; all of these are also divided by muntins. These entrance and window compositions resemble the one shown in the 1910s photograph of the house. In that photo, the house has a central entrance flanked by large windows that are also divided by muntins. However, in the 1910s photo, the division of the doors and windows by muntins is different from how they are now. The windows in the 1910s photo also have low transoms, absent today. Thus while the feeling is similar, all of the details are different between the 1910s and the present.

The gabled pavilions to either side of the entrances have been more radically changed. In the 1910s, these side pavilions had projecting oriels that were covered by gabled roofs. Today, these oriels are gone and in their places are paired casement windows with metal hardware. In the attic level are four-part casement windows that fit snugly under the eaves. Because the oriels have been shaved away, leaving flat walls, the feeling of these end pavilions is very different from that of the original house.

On the east side of the house wooden balconies project from the attic level of the end pavilions. On the west side, a very simple post-and-beam trellis spans the full width of the house. One or both of these features are non-original.

On the north facade the placement of windows and entrance is irregular. Windows are small paired casements, and the door is plain, with upper-level glazing. On the south side, the addition occupies most of the facade. Here, as mentioned above, an aluminum sliding door opens onto an elevated deck.

Except for the south addition, the house appears to be little changed from the time it was altered, most likely by William Simrell, Jr. some time during 1947-1961.

#### <u>History</u>

#### The Morgan family

No building permit or early newspaper account could be found to document the construction of this house. According to a book on the history of Los Altos Hills and in recent planning documents, the house was built in 1909 or 1910 by Percy Morgan as a residence for his retired parents, George Cosmo Morgan and Laura Morgan. Cosmo and Laura Morgan were from England and had come to the United States in 1888. It is said that by the time they settled in this house Cosmo had retired. According to the 1910 census they lived here with three Chinese and Chinese-American servants.

Percy T. Morgan was a native of England who came to the United States in 1881 as a teenager, in advance of his parents. He went first to the mining regions of Colorado and Montana, then to San Francisco as an accountant. Over time he became very successful as a financier and businessman. He was most prominent for his role as president of the California Wine Association and was also a director of the California Fruit Canners Association, a trustee for Stanford University, and a director of the Union Trust bank. Perhaps his most ambitious project was the development of Winehaven, a complex of several large brick winery and wine storage buildings on the shore of San Pablo Bay just north of Richmond. These were built in 1907 to replace the California Wine Association's buildings that were destroyed in San Francisco in 1906.

In the 1890s Percy and Fanny Morgan began buying land in the future Los Altos Hills. According to Florence Fava, Los Altos Hills' official historian, they acquired approximately 132 acres. In 1908, under Fanny's name, the Morgans subdivided about eighteen acres of their holding as the Oneonta Hill Subdivision, comprising five lots of averaging three and one half acres each. In 1909 or 1910, at the west end of this subdivision, Percy Morgan built the subject house for his parents. The Los Altos Hills History Museum has a photograph of this house which is reproduced on the cover of this report and below. It shows Percy's parents, Cosmo and Laura Morgan, and their dog Rollo. The house became known as "Little Gables."

Florence Fava states that the Morgan development consisted of much more than Little Gables. It included eleven cottages, stables, carriage houses, and additional cottages for Chinese workers. She credits Percy and his father Cosmo as the co-developers of this complex. No photograph of the other buildings has been found, nor is there an account of their use or occupancy, or how long they stood.

Morgan remained in San Francisco through 1910, then moved away, probably to his property in Los Altos Hills. Finally, in 1915-1916, he built his own residence at the end of Stonebrook Court. It was a very large Elizabethan Revival house modeled after Speke Hall in England and was designed by San Francisco architect John H. Powers after

preliminary studies by Arthur Brown, Jr. Morgan named the house Lantarnam Hall but it later became known as Morgan Manor. It still stands very near the subject property.

Searchable newspapers reveal that Cosmo George Morgan lived at least through 1913. Later in that year he and his wife were said to be living in Morgan Hill, near Gilroy. The 1920 census states that Laura Morgan was by then a widow and was living with her son Percy and Percy's wife, Fanny (probably at Lantarnam Hall). Very soon after the census was taken Percy Morgan committed suicide. He was said to be despondent over his poor health, probably the result of an auto accident that he had been in several months earlier. How much longer the Morgan family retained Lantarnam Hall and the subject house has not been researched.

## The architecture of the house as originally built

When built in 1909 or 1910 the house was an expressive if vernacular example of the Shingle style. The facade for which a photograph exists (probably the west facade) was symmetrical and had gabled end bays with rectangular oriels. The gables over the oriels related to the larger gables at the top of the end bay. The central entrance and window composition admitted plenty of light into the house, and the shingled covering had lots of surface texture. Muntins in the oriel windows divided them into many small lights and were reminiscent of the Craftsman style. Although a symmetrical facade is usually associated with a formal design, the overall feeling of this house was mainly one of rustic informality. This was a house that fit well into its rural environment.

## William Simrell, Jr. and the incorporation of Los Altos Hills

William LeGrand Simrell, Jr. owned this property from 1949 through 1962. While this is not known for certain, he probably altered this house to roughly its current appearance some time during these years.

He was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1903, studied architecture at George Washington University and in Europe, and opened his own architectural office in New York City. Some time between 1940 and 1944 (probably closer to the latter year) he moved to San Mateo and practiced architecture in San Francisco, where he continued to work for three years. He then moved to Palo Alto, where he opened an office at 1955 El Camino Real and remained there at least to 1950. For two years, 1948-1949, he simultaneously had an office in San Jose in partnership with Kingsford Jones. It is not known where he had his office after buying Little Gables and moving to Los Altos Hills.

Only three of his works are known. The earliest is the Menlo Park Fire District Station No. 4 at 3322 Alameda de las Pulgas (as by Jones and Simrell; 1949). It still stands and is a standard mid-20th century fire station design, little different from many others of its time. The next is the San Mateo Clinic, in San Mateo (as by Simrell and Jones; 1950).

Its location and whether it still stands are unknown. A contemporary published building notice described it as a two-story steel-frame stucco-clad building. The third was the Los Altos Hills Town Hall, to be discussed below.

During 1954-1956 Simrell became heavily involved in a movement to incorporate the town of Los Altos Hills. For some years previous to 1954 four separate neighborhood groups had formed for the purpose of addressing current issues such as the noise and street damage done by heavy trucks that served two nearby quarries. These groups functioned without notable success and they were inadequate to deal with a larger issue that some believed to be on the horizon. This was the possible annexation of the Los Altos Hills area by two nearby cities, Palo Alto, and, especially, Los Altos, which had formed only a few years previously. Although many neighbors would have preferred not to incorporate because to do so would mean more government regulation and higher taxes to support city employees, fear of being annexed changed their mind.

Lot size was perhaps the driving issue. A story in the Los Altos Town Crier (January 2, 2013) relates a story about resident Rex Gardiner that illustrates this concern. Gardiner was a PG&E sales engineer who had recently built a house on a one-acre lot in the Oneonta subdivision of Los Altos Hills. His neighbor William Simrell, Jr. approached Gardiner about the incorporation issue, and Gardiner asked why he should care whether or not they were annexed by the city of Los Altos. Simrell explained "They have quarter acre lots. We should have 1-acre minimum lots." Gardiner was convinced, he joined a committee, and his superiors at PG&E (which would profit from it) allowed him to spend most of 1954 working to incorporate Los Altos Hills.

Simrell was one of a number of people who signed the six-page "Green Sheets" (socalled because of the color of the paper that it was typed on) which argued the case for incorporation. He seems to have been a lead organizer among the neighbors, he served as chairman of the "Foothill Incorporation Committee" and as such conducted its meetings, he compiled lists of property owners and of the assessed valuation of properties, and he produced circulars for distribution.

Others did a lot, too. Rex Gardiner, for example, surveyed power lines, telephone connections and roadways, and wrote up incorporation papers. He traveled on every road in the proposed town with county road commissioners. He also drew a town map which excluded dense population areas and heavily traveled roads whose upkeep would be expensive. In a document entitled "The Formation of the Town of Los Altos Hills" (1971) Florence M. Fava listed six people she thought did the most to promote incorporation, including Simrell, and what each person did.

Opposition, some of it originating outside of the boundaries of the proposed town, emerged, and when the vote on whether to incorporate was held in January 1956 the pro side won, albeit by a smaller margin than had been expected, 424 to 339. The new town

(Santa Clara County's fourteenth) comprised nine and one-half square miles and had a population of 2,500. A five-man city council was elected from seven candidates, Simrell not among them. When a seven member planning commission was formed, however, Simrell was a member.

He had one further contribution. He designed the new town hall and superintended its construction for free. Other people donated the land, donated funds toward construction, graded the site, and performed other services. At the first meeting in the building in February 1957 Mayor Treat praised the contributors, saying "It was William Simrell who, above all, was responsible for incorporation." After this date, Simrell seems not to have been active in Los Altos Hills governance in a way that has been remembered.

William Simrell, Jr. sold his Los Altos Hills property to Gilman Murray, the father of the current owner, in December 1962; and ultimately moved to Santa Barbara, where he died in 1987. Because the town hall he designed had been built to accommodate a very small staff, it was first enlarged and then was torn down and replaced in 2004. The architect of the new building and a resident saved the cupola of the old town hall.

### Alterations to the house

The house as originally built was an expressive and rustic example of the Single style. At some point it was extensively altered. Today both facades are still symmetrical, there are still central entrances and windows that are made of large expanses of glass, the end bays are still gabled, and the surface material is still made of wooden shingles. Nevertheless, the details of this house and its overall character of this house have changed greatly. The end bays have lost their gabled oriels along with their Craftsman style windows. The shingles on this house are much wider than the originals were, with a corresponding loss of surface texture. The casement windows which currently predominate are very different from any that existed in 1910. Exposed purlins and, on the east side, second floor balconies were added. The result is that only the general shape of the house is the same as it was when first built.

The date of the alteration is unknown. The most likely date is 1961. In that year William Simrell, Jr. applied for a building permit to repair fire damage at a cost of \$6,000. This was a fairly large amount for the time, and it seems quite possible that when he repaired the damage Simrell took the opportunity to remodel the house in a more modern style, one more in keeping with his training as an architect. It is also possible that he remodeled the house earlier — for instance, when he bought the house in 1949, so that he could have a modern house to live in. No building permit nor photograph could be found that will prove the question one way of the other, and it does not seem possible to know for certain.

## Integrity

For the period when this house was built, 1909 or 1910, this house has mostly but not entirely lost integrity of design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association due to its alterations. While its basic shape and roofline are similar to that of its early years, the fenestration, type of shingles, and many details are different today. Because the house has never been moved, it retains integrity of location. The setting has changed considerably — reportedly, there were once many other buildings on the grounds — and so its integrity has largely been lost.

The house today represents a mid-20th century design and appears to mostly retain integrity to that period. Because the date the house was remodeled is uncertain (1961 or earlier) the date it retains integrity to cannot be stated with precision.

## Evaluation

<u>Evaluation under Criterion 1 of the California Register</u>: Resources that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of local or regional history, or the cultural heritage of California or the United States.

This house was one of the early houses of Los Altos Hills. Due to loss of integrity, however, it no longer evokes this early period. No other patterns of history related to this house come to mind, and accordingly this house does not appear to be eligible for the California Register under this criterion.

<u>Evaluation under Criterion 2 of the California Register</u>: Resources that are associated with the lives of persons important to local, California, or national history.

Cosmo George Morgan was retired when he moved into this house, and his son Percy T. Morgan is much better represented by the house nearby, once known as Lantarnam Hall. At any rate, the house has been greatly altered since their time.

William Simrell, Jr. was one of six people identified by historian Florence M. Fava as being the most important in the movement to incorporate Los Altos Hills during the years 1954-1956. His activities toward this end are mentioned several times in her book *Los Altos Hills: The Colorful Story*. The first mayor, Sidney Treat, identified Simrell as the most important person of the movement. Although several others were also very active, Simrell appears to have been the main organizer. He was also one of six people who contributed the most to the construction of Los Altos Hills' first town hall (in 1957). (Simrell donated the plans and superintended the construction.) Finally, he was one of seven people appointed to the town's first planning commission.

If this house still looked the way it did when Simrell was active in the above events, during 1954-1957, it would appear to be eligible for the California Register under this criterion. Nevertheless, it is not clear that the house's appearance does date to these years. While Simrell might have remodeled the house when he purchased it in 1949, there is no archival evidence that he did so. All that is known for certain is that he spent \$6,000 for extensive repairs after a fire in 1961, and it seems at least as likely that he took this opportunity to remodel the house then. 1961 is after Simrell's incorporation activities. If the house was remodeled then, it no longer evokes the period when Simrell contributed to that movement.

Regarding Simrell's career as an architect, little has been found. Only three of his works are known, namely an unremarkable fire station in Menlo Park; a clinic in San Mateo for which no image could be found; and the first Los Altos Hills town hall, which was very small. He does not appear to be important for his career as an architect.

For these reasons, it does not seem possible to state that the subject property is eligible for the California Register under this criterion. If it could be proven that the current appearance of the house pre-dates 1954, when Simrell's incorporation activities commenced, this evaluation could change.

Evaluation under Criterion 3 of the California Register: Resources that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, region, or method of construction, or represent the work of a master, or possess high artistic values.

As originally built, this was a notable, if vernacular example of a rustic Shingle style cottage that responded well to its rural environment. That design has been mostly lost, however, from remodeling.

The present design does not evoke any particular style or period. The roofline, with its gables, bargeboard, wide eaves, exposed rafters, and extended purlins, are closest to the Craftsman style of the very early 20th century. The wide, grooved shingles that cover the house were used only during the mid-20th century. The casement windows could date from a wide period, but seem more modern than early. On the plus side, all of the elements (except for the aluminum door in the south addition) are wooden, and hence there is a unity of materials in this house. This unity is pleasing, but on balance the design does not seem to be a distinctive example of an important style.

Accordingly, the property does not appear to be individually eligible for the California Register under this criterion.

#### References

Los Altos Hills. "Appendix A: Inventory of Historic sites and Structures." Lists the subject house.

Official Records 1892, page 278. October 12, 1949. Max E. and Marion Twentier to William (Jr.) and Emily Murray Simrell. Two parcels, including (apparently) the subject land. 3.619 acres plus an adjacent sliver.

Official Records 2915, page 163. Simrell purchases an additional (adjacent?) strip of land.

Percy Morgan obituary, Sacramento Union, April 17, 1920.

Florence M. Fava. *Los Altos Hills: The Colorful Story*. Woodside, CA: Gilbert Richards Publications, 1976.

. "The Formation of the Town of Los Altos Hills." Unpublished document, 1971, at Los Altos History Museum. Identified Simrell's role in incorporation.

Alexander Atkins, ed. Los Altos Hills History Anthology, 1956-2016. Lists William Simrill, Jr. as one of the first planning commission members.

Clippings, Box 7030. At Los Altos History Museum. Notes from the first meeting held at the new Town Hall, February 25, 1957. Comments by Mayor Sidney Treat praising William Simrell, Jr. as "above all others responsible for incorporation," designing the town hall, and guiding the planning commission.

Los Altos Town Crier, January 2, 2013. On Rex Gardiner and his role in LAH incorporation.

PCAD website on William Simrell, Jr. as an architect.

Palo Alto city directories, 1947-1950, for Simrell's listings as an architect.

Christopher Carlsmith. "An Architect by the Bay: John H. Powers and the Firm Powers and Ahnden of San Francisco." *The Argonaut,* Winter 2013.

E-mails from Scott Murray, January 27 and 28, 2019, regarding fire damage to the house (in 1961?), the swimming pool, and the orange brick terrace.

1910 U. S. Census. El Monte Avenue, Fremont Township, Santa Clara County. George Cosmo Morgan, Laura Morgan, and three servants.

1920 U. S. Census. El Monte Avenue. Fremont Township, Santa Clara County. Percy T. organ, his wife Fanny, and his mother Laura, a widow, all living together.

1940 U. S. Census. William Simrell and family in New York City.

Building permits for this address. At Los Altos Hills Town Hall.
Repair of fire damage, October 1961, for \$6,000. Owner was William Simrell, Jr.
Swimming pool permits July 1972. Owner was Gilman Murray.
Roofing permits November 1996 and March 1997.

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Subdivision maps at Santa Clara County offices

Map of N. J. Stone's Subdivision of Lot 2 and 3 and part of Lot 7 and 8 of the Sanborn and Stone Partition in the San Antonio Rancho, page 58.



Map of N. J. Stone's Subdivision of Lot 2 and 3 and part of Lot 7 and 8 of the Sanborn and Stone Partition in the San Antonio Rancho, page 59. The subject property is in parcels 5 and 12 of this map.



Map of the Oneonta Hill Subdivision, being part of the N. J. Stone Subdivision in the San Antonio Rancho. The subject property is in lots D and E of this map.



Oak Knoll Estates map. The subject property is at the west end of Oneonta Drive and the "Lane."





From the city's building permits for this address. Oddly, this map shows the swimming pool and the paved terrace, both of which were created in the 1970s by Gilman Murray.

# **Building permits**

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Repair fire damage to residence, \$6,000. Owner is William Simrell, Jr.

#### William Kostura, Historic Resource Evaluation for 12355 Stonebrook Drive, Los Altos Hills



Permit and plan for swimming pool, July 1972. The latter shows the brick terrace in place.



This plan is difficult to interpret and so was not discussed in the text above. The date is June 1960 and it is titled "Residence for Mr. and Mrs. A. Clark." An address that is penciled in seems to read "12355 Stonebrook" and may be a latter notation.

If the building shown is the subject property, it has an addition at left (perhaps the south addition referred to in the text above) and an addition on the east side, no longer extant. It also seems to show a swimming pool in place, which the current owner says did not exist before 1972. Since William Simrell, Jr. still owned the house in 1961, and sold it to Gilman Murray the following year, it does not seem possible that this plan represents the subject property.



## A photograph of the house in the 1910s, with enlarged details





This photo is most likely of the west side, but this is not certain. Note lack of purlins in main gables.



# Current photos of the house

Top photo: the east facade. Bottom photo: the west facade.





North facade



South facade. Most of what is seen here is an addition of unknown date. The old part of the house is at far right. To the left an aluminum sliding door opens onto a deck.



Entrance pavilion, east facade. Paired doors flank a central window.



Entrance pavilion, west facade. Paired windows flank central doors.



Mullion and muntin detail, entrance pavilion, west facade



Wooden shingles. Note grooves that were added for texture in the milling process. These shingles are wider than typical cedar shingles of the 1890s-1910s. These are similar to shingles used in some suburban houses during the late 1940s and the 1950s.





Paired casement windows, with detail of hardware.



At left: Eave with exposed rafters, north facade.

Below: Gable with plain bargeboard, purlins, and balcony, east facade. Purlins do not show in the 1910s photographs.





View looking SW at east and north facades



View looking SE at north and west facades



View looking NW at the south and east facades



V-groove siding in the base of the south addition (at left) and rustic siding in the base of the main body of the house.