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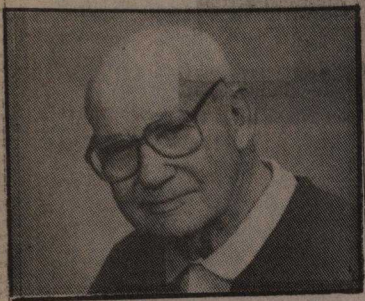
A family farmhouse

Home/garden



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Late afternoon sun bathes the Nigh home as Karla Nigh and Waylon pose near the front porch.



Woodwork and furniture by the late Leonard Rich, above, appear throughout the Nigh home. At right, examples are the coffee table and fireplace facade. Painting is by Richard Gustavson, a friend of Sam Nigh Jr. from days in Scotts Valley.



Spacious home features furniture of local craftsman

By MARYBETH VARCADOS
Sentinel features editor

WHEN KARLA NIGH came to Santa Cruz, she was charmed by the Victorians. And, being from Oklahoma, she'd always loved farmhouses.

So when she and her husband, Sam Nigh Jr. designed a home, it became a nouveau-Victorian farmhouse, looking out to the bay from the hills behind Soquel High School.

When members and prospective members of the Sandpipers Auxiliary of Children's Home Society visit the hilltop home for Victorian tea on Tuesday, they will see home-design ideas from the past adjusted to a 1990s family. And as a bonus, they will see furniture pieces made by an almost unknown area woodworker, the late Leonard Rich.

The home's spacious rooms accommodate Karla and Sam Nigh's three teen-age children, visiting relatives and the family dogs. The home, patterned after a design Karla saw in Country Living magazine, centers on a stairwell and open landing on the second floor. So each room opens to the outside with many windows. Natural light enters from every side.

Sunlight washes over natural-wood floors and area rugs, drawing richness from the paint and fabric colors, shades of teal, mauve, cream and rose. It's a country home, comfortable. Decorative items incorporate rabbits and lace, wreaths made of straw, ribbons.

On a wall in the entry, there's a color photograph of the exterior; it was named 1990 Home of the Year by the American Hardboard Association. The Nighs are a business family, owning a mid-county lumber company. "The award probably is because the hardboard people knew us, and now they are making it a

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Woodworker Leonard Rich's own ideas sometimes overshadowed the customer's request, as in the bedroom set he made for Karla and Sam Nigh Jr. 'I wanted a four-poster bed, and I had envisioned a canopy and all,' said Karla. Above, her four poster.

Farm

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annual thing," said Karla modestly. But a good part of the home's sturdy appearance comes from the use of hardboard, a composite used instead of pure wood.

"What we like is comfort in a house," said Karla. "Our things aren't necessarily valuable, but each has a story — it is a cherished gift, or we bought it somewhere with special meaning."

Then she talked about Leonard Rich. Rich's death came quietly in June; he was 84. She shows the long, heavily varnished dining-room table and eight matching chairs; the large, round kitchen table and chairs. Rich made them for the Nighs, along with Karla and Sam's bedroom furniture, and an entertainment center in the den. Mostly, he worked with mahogany. In the living room, he crafted the fireplace facade. Outside, fish-scale shingles and gingerbread trim.

There's a history to the living room coffee table, a rather decorative piece. As the story goes, a family friend purchased a coffee table from Gump's in San Francisco and wanted a duplicate table, so Rich was hired to create it. The friend decided the copy wasn't good enough, and it gradually sank into

storage recesses at the lumber company. One day Karla rescued it and took it home. And there it stands. Lovely design, big, crude, under Rich's typically heavy layers of finish. Loved more for sentimental than monetary value, Karla explained.

Sam Nigh Sr. and his wife Audrey have many pieces made by Rich. "Our sideboard, and headboards for the beds, bookcases, the facade on the fireplace," Mrs. Nigh ticked off.

For years, Rich worked at Nigh Lumber, which grew from Freeway Lumber; earlier, he worked in various handyman shops. "We sort of inherited him," said Sam the younger. "At one time, he had a shop in the old gas station at the corner (near the lumber yard). But I always remember him in sheet metal, more than wood. I have no idea where he learned all he knew, and I feel remiss now that I never said, Hey Leonard, where'd you learn all this stuff?"

Homespun crafts workers like Rich seldom gain fame. A generation or two treasures their work, then the creator's name fades to oblivion. Rich won't be listed alongside Thomas Chippendale; he was no William Morris.

But if people like Jeffrey and Deborah Dunton had a say, his work would be held in reverence.

According to the obituary which ran June 24 in the Sentinel, Rich was a native of Topeka, Kan., a jack-of-all-trades and a member of Twin Lakes Baptist Church. His wife Grace resides in a local rest home. There is a scattering of relatives, no children.

Except the Duntons. "We were sort of his adopted children," said Deborah. Some years ago, Rich made a saw for Jeff and that led to their deep friendship. "The furniture he made for his home is in our house now. Leonard was a true craftsman. Everything is so detailed."

Rich loved making practical items for people, she continued. Money wasn't as important as religious beliefs. "He would have made a table for someone if he could have talked about the Lord to them," Deborah said. "He should have charged a lot more; he did it for the love of God and hope that people would learn that love he had to share."

The Duntons learned that Rich grew up without a father. "His mother raised the children by herself, and Leonard did a lot of things

to help out," said Deborah. Practicality could have been his middle name.

"He had an incredible sense of design," said the younger Sam Nigh. Once, the two men worked together inventing an aeration system for septic tanks. "Some of his plans were like Rube Goldberg contraptions," said Nigh. "Thing was, they worked when Leonard was there, but when he was gone for a couple of weeks, nobody could make them work."

And, Rich flirted with the saws he used, Nigh said, especially in his later years. "His finger would be a quarter inch away from the blade as he worked, and there he was, shaking like crazy. Every once in a while, he would come in the office, a towel turning red around his hand and ask, 'Do you have a Band-Aid?' But he never seriously hurt himself. He was quick."

Thus, the people's craftsman. "He was a great guy," said Nigh. "Everyone loved him."

The three-year-old Victorian farmhouse of Karla and Sam Nigh will be setting for the Sandpipers' membership tea at 11:30 a.m. Tuesday. For membership information, call 425-3933 or 438-4992.