

# The lasting elegance of a Victorian Lady



Life in a century-old Queen Anne home

By Justine DaCosta

**W**alking down Walnut Avenue, where Victorian homes adorn the tree-lined street, is like taking a step back in time and into a children's story book.

(Above) The Liebmann's 1903 Queen Anne home is one of the more stately on Walnut Avenue.





The home's living room is filled with antiques and overlooks the neighborhood through a bay window.

Many of the beautiful Santa Cruz homes were built more than a century ago. The mauve Queen Anne that computer simulation engineer Peter Liebmann and his opera singer wife Bonnie have called home for 13 years was built in 1903. Its eclectic design incorporates elements from Eastlake and Colonial Revival styles, but the gingerbread trim is definitely Queen Anne.

"The color of the house was just what we wanted," Bonnie said. "The only thing we wanted to do was add color to the trim. It's a Victorian thing, so we were not shy about it. The whole neighborhood is pretty much like that. I love it. I'm happy to have a door that has six colors on it."

The Liebmanns chose bold hues ranging from lime green to gold to pink. It's all part of the charm that delights tourists and locals alike as they walk through the neighborhood. The lush lawn in front also adds color and dimension, but it's not what it seems. It's actually faux grass, though you'd never know that by looking at it. There are a variety of little mounds and grooves, as well as interspersed blades of grass that look as though they are turning brown.



A wrought iron canopy bed graces the sun-filled master bedroom.



"This is not your mother's Astro Turf," Bonnie said.

They chose to install it because it is ecologically sounder and is less expensive to maintain than natural grass. There's no watering, no gas or electricity needed to power lawn mowers, and no noise-polluting landscaping machines.

Newly installed accent tiles on the stairs leading to the front door create a brightness, which is countered with the warm filtered light and natural wood found in the entryway of the home.

A vintage piano sits near the front door and a staircase leads upstairs, where there are two bedrooms and a bright, airy bathroom. The master bedroom overlooks the street below, and a former nursery was transformed into a walk-in closet that any woman would envy.

Shallow wooden stairs lead to the rooms below, where a sitting room overlooks a Japanese maple and the foliage on the street. Two modern chandeliers light the room, which is decorated with antique furniture and historic treasures, including Bonnie's favorite, a hundred-year-old radio that now shows off a collection of cocktail and martini glasses.

"My grandmother had it copied from a piece in the Metropolitan Museum of Art," said Bonnie, a New York native who studied at Julliard. "I took off the top and put in shelves." The patina of the antique wood is highlighted with small inlaid flowers.

A dining area sits off the back of the room, the original fireplace, although non-operational, has a presence in the corner with its intricately carved dark wooden mantel.

An open walkway leads from the entryway into what was a formal dining room, now a living space adorned with paintings. One of the pieces on display is a four-foot tall painting of a young South American girl. It was given to Bonnie by the artist, who is a friend. It reminds Bonnie of a time when she lived far from family and felt disconnected.

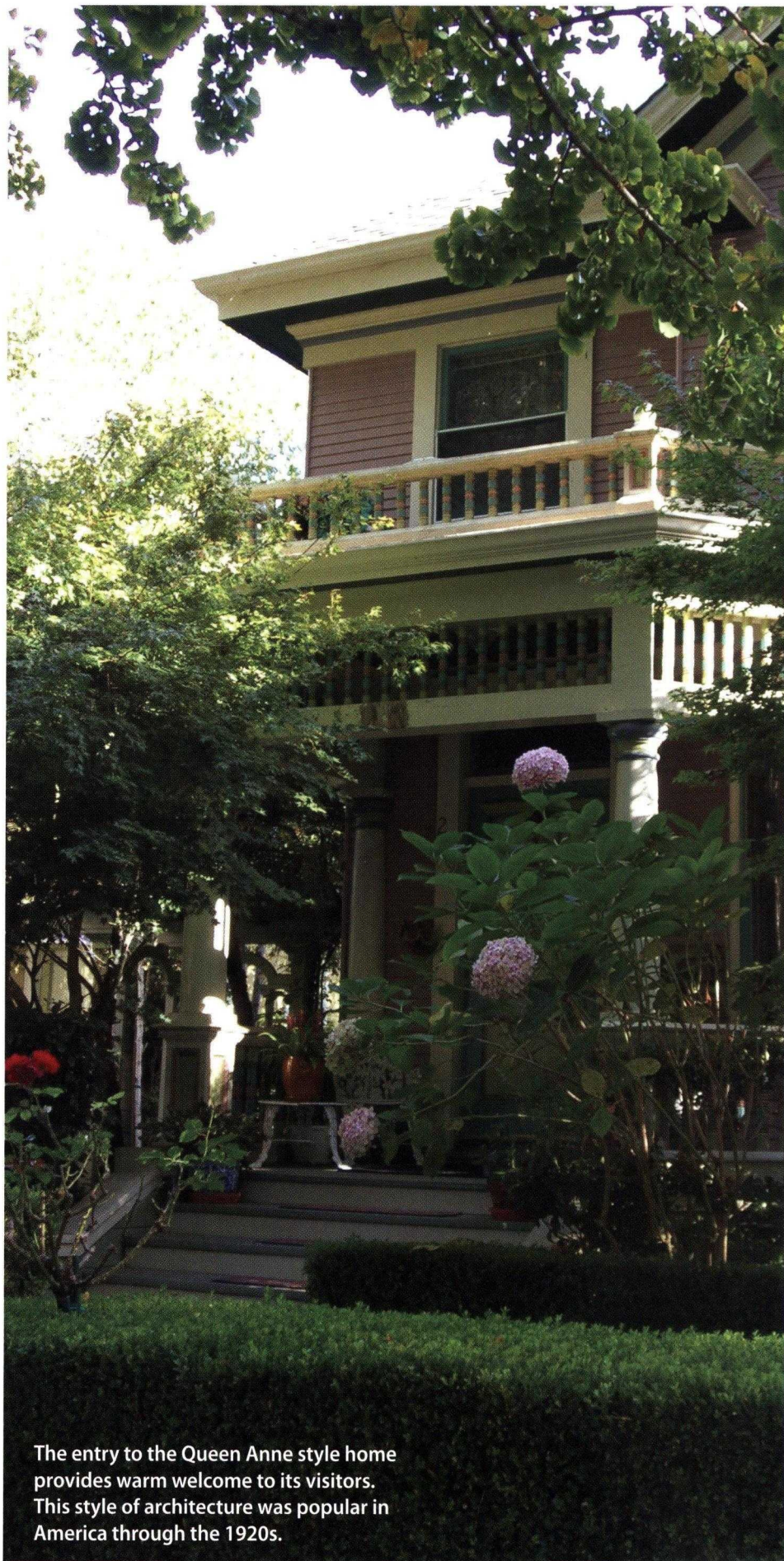
"Every time I'd see her, I wouldn't be sad anymore," she said. "It cheered me up."

On the far wall is a pass-through cabinet between the pantry room and the dining room. Its original purpose was to serve as a portal through which servants could pass food from the pantry — which still features original oak cabinets and dark metal hardware — to the dining room.

"It also works well for puppet shows," Bonnie said. She actually has also used it to stage shows for her grandchildren.

The dark pantry leads into a bright, white, modern kitchen, with tall, recessed ceilings. The juxtaposition of the two rooms is striking in contrast. Here, she likes to cook up meals for family and friends.

"I love to add things nobody would expect," she said.



The entry to the Queen Anne style home provides warm welcome to its visitors. This style of architecture was popular in America through the 1920s.





The formal dining contains the original fireplace fitted with an ornamental cast iron summer cover that features a sculpted relief.



Bonnie (inset), former opera singer and graduate of Juilliard School, New York's performing arts conservatory, makes music a focal point in her home.



The kitchen opens up into the Liebmanns' backyard, a long, narrow space that has a garden, sitting and dining area.

"This is just a wonderful place for us," said Bonnie, who helps run the Metropolitan Opera Simulcast Live in HD. The mezzo-soprano, whose career has included performing in opera houses and on Broadway, loves bringing the Met to the West Coast in real time, at Regal Cinemas Santa Cruz 9 downtown.

"We take off our jackets and we watch them take off their jackets," she said. "It's so all-encompassing and real."

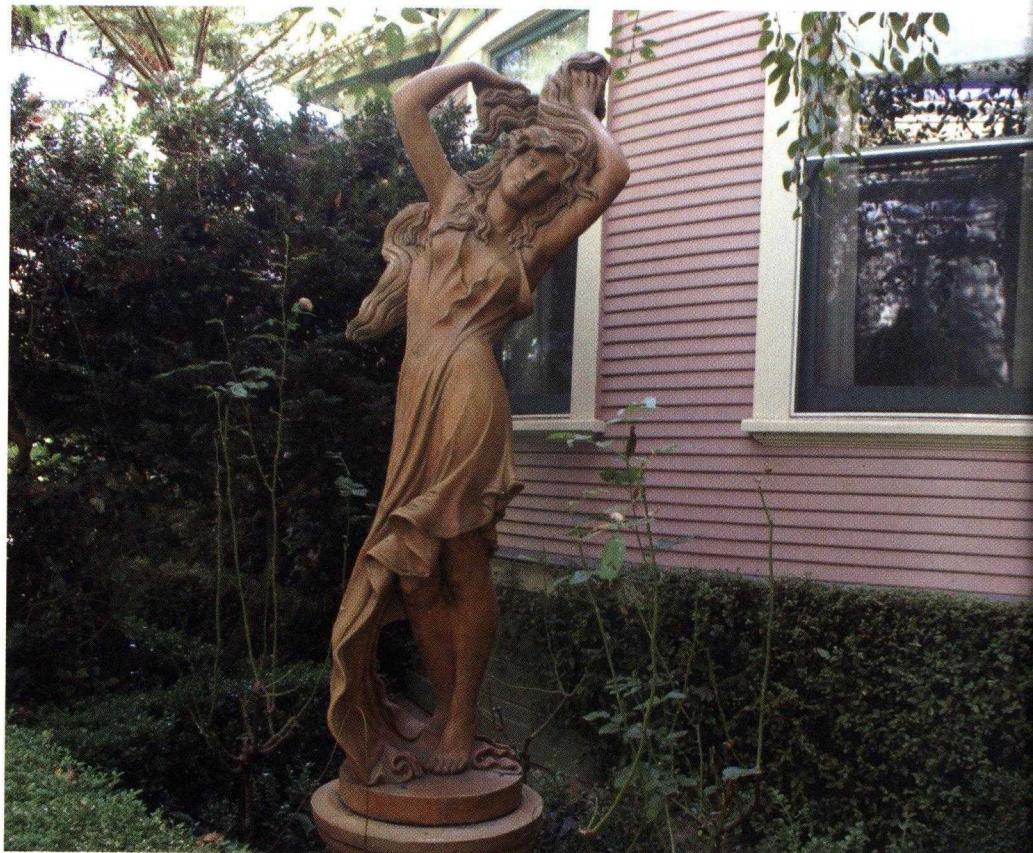
Also real, if you ask some of Bonnie's friends, are ghosts who inhabit the Liebmanns' lovely home. These ghosts are not scary.

"They're supposedly healing spirits," Bonnie said. And she should know. She was diagnosed with breast cancer within the first two weeks after she and Peter moved into the house.

"I know I healed so much better being here," she said. "I wasn't here even a week when people started bringing flowers over. Neighbors I barely knew were bringing me lunch."

Bonnie did heal. And her historic house and neighborhood became far more than just a place to hang her hat.

"It was home," she said. 🌿



Violetta, a life-size goddess sculpture, adds a romantic air to the home's Victorian gardens.



The home's entry hall with its trademark Victorian-style staircase featuring an elaborate newel and hand turned supports.