

The Smallest of The Albert Kahn Houses

By Beverly Gwendolyn Benyi

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Acknowledgement

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Albert Kahn, foremost Detroit architect of the 1890's to 1940's, built what is known as "the smallest of the Kahn houses" in the late 1930's in West Dearborn. Tara Gnau, granddaughter of the original owners, Maude and Fred Black, granted me an interview on Sunday, October 18, 1987. During the interview, we discussed the history and architectural features of this lovely home.

Benyi: Tara, would you please set the stage for this interview by beginning with some family background?

Gnau: My grandfather had been employed by the Whittier Paper Company in Lexington, Kentucky and was transferred to their Detroit office in 1916 where on his clients was the Detroit News. It was during that time, that he met Howard E. Scripps, owner and publisher of the News. Mr. Scripps introduced my grandfather to Henry Ford and Mr. Ford took an immediate liking to him. Mr. Scripps and Mr. Ford had become acquaintances because Mr. Ford was then involved in the newspaper business through his ownership of the Dearborn Independent. I have been told that Mr. Ford did not know anything about running a newspaper just like he never knew anything about anything else in his life; but he certainly did a good job about everything he did not know what to do with. He has purchased this newspaper and he was looking for a Business Manager. He said to my grandfather one day, "Mr. Black, how would you like to come to Dearborn and be Business Manager for my newspaper, the Dearborn Independent?" Of course, grandpa did not know anything about being a Business Manager either; and he did not know anything about running a newspaper. I am not sure he had even had a course in Journalism while in college. But anyway, he accepted and come to Dearborn in 1918 and moved into one of the first homes on Nona Avenue. It was this time that Henry Ford changed the whole focus of the Independent and turned it into a weekly magazine tabloid format instead of a straight newspaper format. It was at this time that Mr. Ford got himself into all kinds of legal trouble. The Selden Patient Trial in New York City and the Defamation Trial also held out of the state were the talk of the town. In fact, my Grandpa was at both trials and testified in favor of Mr. Ford, stating that Mr. Ford was not anti-Jewish. I think that this charge is very interesting given the fact that Albert Kahn, who was an Orthodox Jew, and Mr. Ford were very close friends. At any rate, Mr. Ford was judged innocent in both instances, and soon after the conclusion of both trials, the Dearborn Independent

folded and my grandfather became the first head of the Public Relations Department at the Ford Motor Company.

Benyi: So, Mr. Black left the newspaper position?

Gnau: At the conclusion of the Defamation Trial, the judge had ordered Mr. Ford to sell his holding in the Dearborn Independent. As a result, Mr. Ford sold the paper.

Benyi: Tell me about Mr. Black's new job at the Ford Motor Company.

Gnau: One of Grandpa's duties as Business Manager of the Dearborn Independent had been the responsibility of entertaining all of Mr. Ford's guests. This responsibility also carried over his new position with the Ford Motor Company. Now, a lot of people came to Dearborn to see Mr. Ford. Some of them just came; some were invited. Many literary figures of the day such as Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Hugh Walpole were all guests because they were writers for the Dearborn Independent. Norman Rockwell came because he did illustrations for the Independent. Later, people wanted to meet Mr. Ford even though he was no longer in the newspaper business; and of course they did. Mr. Ford's home, Fairlane, was built about this time. One of the interesting things about Fairlane for a house that big, is that it only has five bedrooms. It has been said that Henry Ford purposely planned it that way so that he would never have to have guests. Well, be that as it may, I am not really sure whether that line is true. The Fords never did have guests other than the one exception, Thomas Edison.

Benyi: Mr. Edison was a very close friend to Henry Ford. As an alumna of the Edison Institute High School in Greenfield Village, I am aware of this close friendship between the two men.

Gnau: That's right. Otherwise, the Fords never did have guests. When people came to Dearborn to see Henry Ford, Mr. Ford did meet them but he passed along the responsibility of taking care of his guests to someone else; and that someone else was generally my grandfather.

Benyi: Had the Dearborn Inn been built at this time?

Gnau: No, it had not. As I said earlier, my grandparents lived in a house on Nona Avenue which was also known as the Ford Subdivision. Their home was the largest model but still the houses are not all that huge. Also, my mother was growing up and they just had one bathroom and that was a big problem when entertaining overnight guests. When the Dearborn Country Club was

built they could ship people over there and when the Dearborn Inn was later built, they were in seventh heaven.

Benyi: Had Mr. and Mrs. Black started thinking of moving into a larger home?

Gnau: Yes. My grandmother had been saying for some time that they really needed a bigger house. Henry Ford thought that they did, too, and in the 1920's, Henry Ford told them that he would give them the land for a house; any land that they wanted and as much land as they wanted anywhere he owned property in Dearborn which was a lot of it at the time. He even arranged for my grandfather's salary to be raised to accommodate for the building of the house. Well, Harry Bennett who was becoming active in the company and some other people put a stop to that. My grandfather found out through Mr. Ford's personal secretary that he did not get the raise. However, Mr. Ford did not know that it had not been put through. It was very difficult for my grandparents because when they would see the Fords, socially, Mr. Ford would ask them when they were going to start the house but they could not afford to start it because Grandpa had not gotten the raise. My grandmother said that it was really, really ticklish. She must have been the only one in Dearborn who was happy when the Depression came along because that put a stop to the talk of the house.

Benyi: Prior to the Depression had there been any serious talk about where the house would be built?

Gnau: Yes, there had been. Originally what was supposed to happen was that the strip of land along North Brady where the First Presbyterian Church is now, was going to belong to the Roy Bryants, Clara Ford's brother and sister-in-law, the Ruddimans, friends of the Ford's and the Blacks. Mr. Kahn had built Roy Bryants home in the early 1930's when the country was starting to come out of the Depression; the Ruddimans selected another piece of property near Outer Drive and Cherry Hill and my grandparents never got around to building that early because Grandpa did not get his promised raise.

Benyi: When did things start getting better financially for your grandparents?

Gnau: It started, ironically, during the later stages of the Depression. The concept of business changed; the media were becoming important; that is, radio and the printed word. Companies began to realize they needed these functions. Henry Ford was talked into participating in the

Chicago World's Fair in 1933. Actually, my Grandfather was put in charge of the World's Fair not only in Chicago but also the later ones in New York, Dallas, and San Diego. As the Depression began to level off and things began to pick up, Henry Ford reissued his invitation of another piece of property and so this time, my grandparents did it. They chose property at the corner of Cherry Hill and Brady and they hired Mr. Ford's good friend, Albert Kahn to build their new home.

Benyi: How soon after the property had been selected did Mr. Kahn begin drawing up plans for the house?

Gnau: In the strict sense of the word it is really not a house completely designed by Albert Kahn because my grandmother had seen plans in a magazine for a house similar to the one they built, which she liked. Those were the plans she gave to Albert Kahn and she said, "This is what I want."

Benyi: Did Mr. Kahn modify the plans?

Gnau: Yes, there were quite a number of changes made before the actual construction began. Besides the modifications which were mutually agreed upon, there were things that Mr. Kahn wanted to change, but my grandmother would not agree to them. Mr. Kahn was sorry about that and so later on was Grandma. She said to me as I was growing up, "Tara, if there is ever a time in your life when you are building a house, there is one place where you should never economize and that is the kitchen. Hire a second kitchen designer to come in and do your kitchen."

Benyi: Someone, in other words, whose forte is kitchens.

Gnau: Yes, just kitchens, because that is what Albert Kahn wanted to do. He wanted to send over someone from the firm whose specialty was kitchens. And Grandma, well they were not pinching pennies, but she did not want to blow everything. She said, "No, I will do the kitchen myself." She later said it was the worst mistake she ever made. It was an awful kitchen in which to work. It would cost a lot of money to do anything with it today.

Benyi: Why is that? I remember seeing the house eight years ago when you had it for sale and I recall quite a bit about the house including the layout of the rooms and I remember thinking only that the kitchen looked somewhat dated.

Gnau: I had done some modernization in the kitchen. The problem with the house and it is true of other rooms and not just the kitchen, is that there are so many doors. Almost every wall in the house is broken by either a door or a window. It is unknown to have any kind of unbroken low space in that house. The kitchen alone has six doors.

Benyi: Six doors coming in and out of that one room!?

Gnau: That is right. The library has only one door; the living room has one entrance but the dining room has three.

Benyi: Was this an Albert Kahn's design or was it in the original plan?

Gnau: That I do not know, I just do not know. Grandma complained about this later. She said "That is a problem with this house, it is so broken up by doors."

Benyi: Then no one recognized that that peculiarity existed when the plans were examined?

Gnau: A lot of times, no you do not. One of the results though of all those doors, is that every single room can be shut off individually. No matter how many doors it had, every room could be totally isolated.

Benyi: Do you remember how the doors were hung?

Gnau: Yes, all doors have three hinges. One of the things that is interesting about my grandparent's home is another factor about the doors. My grandfather liked a plain door, my grandmother wanted beveled ones.

Benyi: Your grandmother then preferred more detail.

Gnau: Yes, so they compromised. The first floor had the detailed doors of my grandmother's choosing and the second floor has the solid doors of my grandfather's liking.

Benyi: That is not a bad compromise.

Gnau: Nobody ever noticed. You really have to go some to notice the difference. Also, my grandfather liked brushed chrome doorknobs and my grandmother wanted brass, and so the brass doorknobs are downstairs and the brushed chrome knobs are on the doors upstairs.

Benyi: I have been in the Detroit News Building which is an Albert Kahn design and couldn't help but notice how beautifully made the doors are in that building. Do you suppose that the doors in Mr. and Mrs. Black's home are there because of Mr. Kahn's influence?

Gnau: It is certainly possible. We never had any trouble with them, they always fit well. I actually never knew doors warped or swelled. Our doors shut the same way day in and day out; snow, rain, 90 degrees or 13 below zero. It did not make any difference, the doors always shut perfectly.

Benyi: What is the size of the property the Black's selected for their home site?

Gnau: When my grandparents chose that triangular piece of property it was a little bit less than an acre. The land now goes part way down the hillside toward the Rouge River. When I had the property surveyed in 1980, we had lost 2 ½ feet of that acre.

Benyi: Was that land loss due to erosion?

Gnau: I would say so.

Benyi: Why did Mr. and Mrs. Black choose that piece of property over the one on North Brady that Mr. Ford had originally offered to them?

Gnau: I really do not know to tell you the truth. I do not know why they chose that spot instead of the other.

Benyi: Perhaps they liked that piece of property near the river better.

Gnau: That may have had something to do with it.

Benyi: Of course, there was not anything else around. Did Cherry Hill run into Brady at the time?

Gnau: Yes, Cherry Hill was a two lane dirt road which was not paved until 1950.

Benyi: Then Brady ran all the way south to Michigan Avenue. How far north did it run?

Gnau: North Brady past Cherry Hill was a private drive into Roy Bryant's property until that land which was all owned by Henry Ford was subdivided in 1950. Incidentally, have you ever seen the abstract of my grandparents house?

Benyi: No, I have not.

Gnau: I gave a copy of it to the Dearborn Historical Museum a few years ago. When the house was built, an abstract was needed and the Burton Abstract Company charged \$1,000 for it which Henry Ford paid out of his own pocket.

Benyi: That seems like an awfully lot of money for that time.

Gnau: Yes, I think so too. However, to do an original abstract takes a lot of time and research. Ours goes all the way back to the first French Land Claim. The abstract is huge.

Benyi: I will definitely take a look at the abstract. It sounds like it would be interesting reading.

Gnau: When I got ready to sell the house some people asked if I was sure that I owned it and I said, "What do you mean, do I own it? Of course, I am sure I own it." Additionally, I was asked if I had the deed and I said, "of course I have the deed." The real estate people, before they would even accept the listing had to see the deed. I thought, "Gee, this is awfully funny," until I found out that Mr. Ford had not given deeds to quite a number of people to whom he had given property.

Benyi: Oversight?

Gnau: No.

Benyi: He wanted to keep control of the people and the land.

Gnau: That is right. But he did not do that to my grandparents. The deed is signed by both Clara and Henry Ford. Incidentally, there are some things on the blueprints which are not correct.

Benyi: What are they?

Gnau: In the 1960's, the City of Dearborn decided to put in new sewer lines through the back of the hillside. According to the blueprints that they had down at City Hall for our house the blueprints indicated we were on a septic tank when the house was built.

Benyi: According to the time, that would be accurate.

Gnau: Right, and that is where, what could have been a problem, comes in. When Henry Ford realized that there were no sewers in the ground, he had the sewer, water, and gas lines brought up to the house and paid for them himself. Unfortunately, it was noted on the blueprints.

Benyi: I will take another look at the blackline prints that I received from Mr. Joe Bedway at Albert Kahn Associated in Detroit and see if there is any indication of a septic system. Now Tara, can you tell me about the relationship between Mr. Kahn and the Blacks?

Gnau: Albert Kahn was a very good friend of my grandparents and my grandparents were very fond of the Kahns. My grandmother used to say that Mr. Kahn and his wife were the same age and generation as Henry and Clara Ford, which was a generation older than my grandparents. In fact, my grandmother and Edsel Ford were just a few weeks apart in age. Grandma and Grandpa were always very respectful of the Kahns and also very fond of the Kahn children.

Benyi: What was the monetary agreement between Mr. Kahn and the Blacks?

Gnau: I know my Grandpa paid Mr. Kahn for his work on the house, but probably only a nominal fee. I do not know if there was a financial agreement between Mr. Ford and Mr. Kahn. Also, a lot of things in the house are things that my Grandfather obtained through the Ford Motor Company; but he paid for everything. I have a file of all receipts and it is quite thick with all of the bills pertaining to the building of the house. They really are of no use to anyone now that the house has been sold; just sentimental value.

Benyi: Was construction on the house started in 1936?

Gnau: No, in the fall of 1937. It was completed in the fall of 1938.

Benyi: What style is the house classified architecturally?

Gnau: Federal

Benyi: That is what I thought.

Gnau: Yes, it is definitely Federal. My grandmother was very fond of the Federal architecture of the Tidewater region. That is what she was trying to reproduce in this house. When she has the house painted she wanted the white paint to wash off for that weathered look. Well, Albert Kahn did not like that idea and argued with her. She thought she had won the argument when the

painters came and then discovered she had not. Mr. Kahn had ordered permanent white paint put on the house. A number of people later on said, "Why don't you have your house painted?" When Grandma became ill in 1979 it had just started to look the way she had always wanted it to look. It took 40 years. But there is another factor to the story and I have always wondered if perhaps Albert Kahn simply never explained the situation to Grandma. You see, the house was built with brick from Mercier's Brick Company located in Dearborn and that brick is notoriously soft and therefore, crumbles. I guess Mr. Kahn knew what he was doing when he ordered the permanent white paint for the house. The paint kept the brick from chipping and crumbling.

Benyi: I often wondered too, why the house had not been repainted throughout the years.

Gnau: We are not used to seeing houses with that weathered look that my grandmother was attempting to achieve, in this area. That is not a style that is particularly known here. If you were from the Tidewater area in the south, yes, you would be used to that look which is very regional.

Benyi: I understand that Mr. Kahn liked to use wood paneling in his houses. Did the Black home have rooms where paneling was used?

Gnau: None. Even the library walls are entirely bookshelves and have built-in cupboards.

Benyi: According to the blackprints, the living room is rectangular in shape. Is there any design to the ceiling or are there any boarders.

Gnau: There are no boarders and the ceilings are covered.

Benyi: What kind of windows are in the house, twelve over twelve or six over six?

Gnau: Six over six.

Mrs. B: According to the plans, there is a long center hall as you enter the house, and a library, living room, dining room, and kitchen on the first floor.

Gnau: There is also a coat closet and a half bath.

Benyi: I do not have the plans for the second floor. Would you describe the layout of the second story?

Gnau: The stairs make a 90 degree turn to the east and then you come to a formal open hall. On the east wall there is a built-in linen closet with mirrored glass, twelve over twelve if I remember correctly.

Benyi: Do you mean there is a glass door on the closet?

Gnau: Doors yes, and then cupboards down underneath the shelves on the inside. It is quite an elaborate linen closet. Coming around the top of the stairway back to the west you come into the master bedroom suite. The master suit is two separate bedrooms. My grandparents each had their own bedroom with a connecting door.

Benyi: Another door.

Gnau: (laughing) Yes, another door. My grandmother's bedroom was the largest in the house.

Benyi: I am sorry. Is this one big room with a partial wall separating the two rooms?

Gnau: No, there are two separate rooms. My grandmother's bedroom was over the living room with an attached bath and a walk-in closet with full mirrors on the outside of the doors. My grandfather's bedroom which has one wall of built in bookshelves also has a walk-in closet. The bathroom in that room has a stall shower instead of a tub. I might mention that all of the bedrooms have walk in closets. As one comes out of Grandpa's bedroom and walks eastward, there are two more adjoining bedrooms with a shared bath.

Benyi: So there are three bathrooms.

Gnau: No, there are four full baths upstairs and a half bath on the first floor. There are two steps out of the one back bedroom, the bedroom located over the kitchen that goes through a small hall past the back stairs coming up from the kitchen. This goes directly to the maid's quarters.

Benyi: Is that the room above the garage?

Gnau: Yes, it is and it also has its own separate bathroom.

Benyi: Did the Blacks have a maid who occupied those quarters?

Gnau: My grandparents had a woman who worked for them for many years and she would stay overnight occasionally, usually when there was a big party. She then did not have to go home at 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning.

Benyi: Tell me about the stairs that come up from the kitchen to the second floor.

Gnau: Those stairs really served a multi purpose. If someone was in the kitchen and had to go upstairs they did not have to go around to the front hall and use the main stairway. Also, the maid, when she stayed, could leave the kitchen after cleaning up and not have to go through the main part of the house to get to her room.

Benyi: It appears that the house was built at one time, that there were no additions.

Gnau: That is correct. There was a fire in the 1940's. The house has an incinerator which, of course, is not used any longer because of city code. At that time, a piece of burning paper came out of the chimney and landed on the roof which was cedar shake and burned off part of the roof over the garage. The roof was replaced.

Benyi: Was the roof replaced with cedar shake?

Gnau: Yes, we had cedar shake until the 1970's. The squirrels by that time had become so fond of cedar that they literally ate holes in the roof so we had it replaced this time with a composition roof, mainly because the cost of cedar shake had become so prohibitive. Also, because that type of roof was no longer code in Dearborn. The composition roof actually worked out much better. That is the only change that has been made to the house.

Benyi: Is there just one fireplace in the house?

Gnau: No, there are four.

Benyi: Four! Where are they located?

Gnau: There is one in the center of the house where the incinerator is and there is one in the front, in the living room. There is a fireplace in the master bedroom, that is Grandma's room, and a fireplace in the basement in the recreation room.

Benyi: You said "in the center of the house." Is that a natural fireplace?

Gnau: It could be if anyone wanted to have one built. That is actually where the incinerary flue is. Grandma had often talked of having a fireplace put there, but did not go through with it.

Benyi: Several fireplaces on a house is very indicative of Tidewater or Federal architectural design.

Gnau: Yes, very much so.

Benyi: Did your grandparents often entertain?

Gnau: Yes, they did, extensively.

Benyi: I understand that you lived in the house at one time.

Gnau: After my mother died in 1966, my brother and I moved in to stay with Grandma. When I started cleaning out the house in 1980 before it was sold, I was working on close to 75 years of possessions from three households. The house was really crowded and also unique, in that I had to move out of the house before it could be sold. People coming in were so entranced with the furniture they were not looking at the house.

Benyi: I am sure that it was very hard to move from a house that had been on the family for so many years.

Gnau: In one way it was a hard decision and in one way it was not. It was not a difficult decision to make in terms of economics. There was not really any other choice that was economically feasible. And too, I was not happy living there alone. It is a very large house particularly for one person and it is also somewhat isolated. I could yell my head off, if there was a problem where I needed help and no one would have heard me. Also, according to my grandmother's will, the property was to be divided equally between my brother and me. I did not want the house, so in that respect it was a simple decision. The actual business of moving and leaving the house was one of the hardest things I have ever done. It was also heartbreaking. But, it was the only practical thing to do and I brought all of my favorite things with me.

Benyi: How was the original landscaping of the property handled.

Gnau: Much of what we had were native Michigan plantings. The landscaping was done by a landscaping architect. Once everything had been planted, my grandparents did their own gardening.

Benyi: Is much of what was planted in 1938 still in evidence?

Gnau: Unfortunately of the thirteen Elms that had been planted all succumbed to the Dutch Elm disease of recent years. There were no to the hard wood trees planted.

Benyi: What about flowers?

Gnau: I think that there are a couple of rose bushes left and perhaps some of the peonies are still thriving.

Benyi: Is there a full basement under the house?

Gnau: Yes, a full basement and a full attic.

Benyi: Are there stairs leading up to the attic?

Gnau: No, there are pull down stairs, which is the only thing that stopped my grandparents from finishing the attic. They talked about finishing the attic a number of times. The problem with doing that, however, was that they would have lost the utility closet because of having to put a stairway where that closet is located.

Benyi: Where is the utility closet?

Gnau: It is located behind the linen closet, actually between the linen closet and the closet in the front master bedroom. The closet could have been converted into stairs up to the third floor. Had that plan materialized, they would have lost very little space out of either the linen or the front closets.

Benyi: There is enough room then to stand up in the attic and move freely about?

Gnau: Oh yes.

Benyi: In looking over the blackprints of the living room, it appears that something was to have been built in the corner at the south end of the room. I do not recall seeing a built-in when I visited the house.

Gnau: There was nothing there. I do not know what that could possibly have been.

Benyi: I see that there is a terraced porch off the living room.

Gnau: That terraced area originally had a canvas awning and screens were put up in the summer. By the time I was a child, the screens had deteriorated and the family stopped putting them up each year. For a long time, Grandma talked about having that area made into a permanent built-in

porch with a real roof and permanent screening; but she could not make up her mind about doing it, so, it never happened.

Benyi: I see there is one other room that we have not discussed. It is the small room adjacent to the library on the first floor. What was that room?

Gnau: That was my grandfather's office. I recall that he spent a lot of time in that room.

Benyi: Can you think of anything that we have not discussed or recall any other memories of the house?

Gnau: Not off hand. I believe that we have pretty much covered the story.

Benyi: Thank you, Tara, for granting me this most interesting and informative interview. It is to Maude and Fred Black's credit that in 1937 they had the foresight to select probably Detroit's most outstanding architect, Albert Kahn, to build their home. A decision, I might add which aesthetically has also benefited the City of Dearborn.

Albert Kahn died in 1942, four years after the completion of the Black residence. Mr. Kahn's illustrious career as an architect includes such buildings as the Eleanor and Edsel Ford Home, Grosse Point, 1927; the first Rose Terrace Home of H.E. Dodge also in Grosse Point, 1910; the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1923; the Ford Plant, Highland Park, 1910; the General Motors Building, Detroit, 1922; the Detroit News Building, Detroit, 1915; the Detroit Free Press Building, Detroit, 1925; the Ford Rouge Complex, Dearborn, 1917-1938; the Fisher Building, Detroit, 1928; Angell Hall, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1922; the Detroit Athletic Club (DAC), Detroit, 1915; the Maccabees Building, Detroit, 1927 and the Packard Plant, Detroit, 1903-1911.