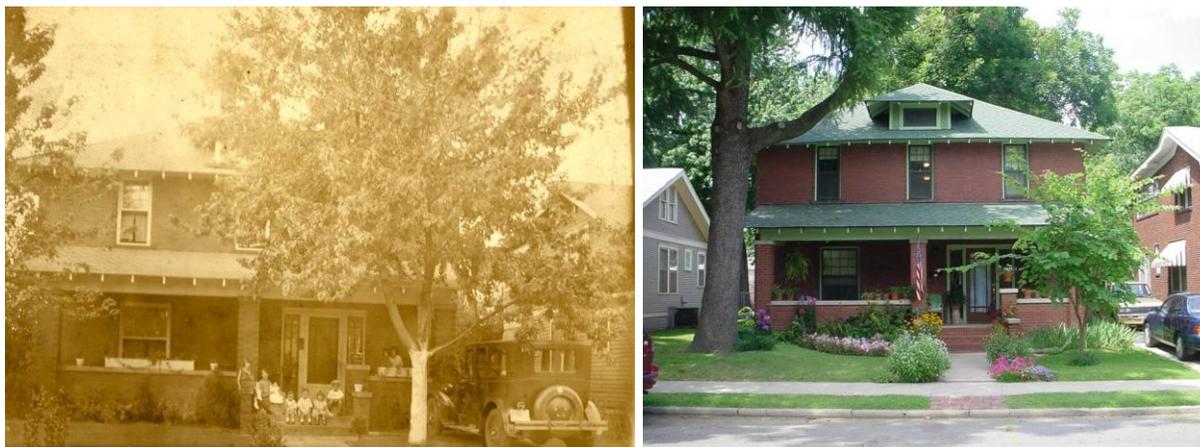


**Sandwiching in History**  
**C. Owen O'Kelley House**  
**413 W. 5<sup>th</sup> Street, North Little Rock**  
**May 2, 2014**  
**By: Rachel Silva**



## **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 O’Kelley House! I’d like to thank Gary, Ann, and Austin Clements for allowing us to tour their beautiful home (and for providing delicious refreshments)! Also recognize O’Kelley family members.

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 or Patricia Blick after the tour if you’re interested.

The Columbus Owen O’Kelley House was built in 1919 and is located in the Argenta Historic District, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1993 (amended several times, with the latest boundary expansion done in 2007).

[The district is roughly bounded by Melrose Circle and 9th Street on the north, N. Broadway on the west, W. 4th Street and Broadway on the south, and Poplar Street on the east.]

## **Argenta History**

The City of North Little Rock was called Argenta in its early days of settlement. Thomas Willoughby Newton, Sr., owned a large tract of farmland in this area and served as president of the Southwest & Arkansas Mining Company. Beginning in the late 1840s, Newton's mining company extracted silver and lead from the Kellogg Mine, which was located about 10 miles north of Argenta. In 1866 Thomas Newton's son, Colonel Robert C. Newton, named the newly platted town Argenta because of the silver his father had mined at "Kellogg diggins" (argentum is the Latin word for silver).

Argenta thrived because of the railroad industry. The Memphis & Little Rock Railway was the first operating railroad in Arkansas, and it ran east-west from Memphis to Argenta. The Memphis & Little Rock (which later became the Rock Island) crossed the Little Rock & Fort Smith Railway (later merged with Iron Mountain) at 4th Street between Poplar and Magnolia, and the St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railroad (became Missouri Pacific in 1917 and currently Union Pacific) came into Argenta along the path of what would be 11<sup>th</sup> Street and curved to the southwest, where it crossed the Arkansas River at the Baring Cross Bridge (completed 1873). The Iron Mountain railroad shops were west of Argenta in Baring Cross (current Union Pacific shops), and the M & LR shops were on the north side of 4th Street between Olive and Locust. Many residents of Argenta were employed by the railroad in some capacity.

Argenta was a rough town—it had no municipal government in the early days and was considered virtually lawless. In fact, the Arkansas Gazette often condemned Argenta, calling the town "a deserving candidate for a shower of brimstone." [AG 6/2/1877] Another Gazette article from November 25, 1880, insisted that Argenta "should be either incorporated or attached to Little Rock. Each train brings a

number of tramps and disreputable characters to the place, who should not be tolerated in any community..." Gambling was also commonplace in Argenta, leading the Gazette to dub Argenta the "crap shooting center of Arkansas." [AG 9/1/1889]

Argenta residents recognized these problems, and in 1890, they filed a petition to incorporate as a city of the first class. However, this attempt was quashed by Little Rock, when it claimed Argenta as its 8th Ward. Referencing a law that excluded voters in the targeted annexation area, the City of Little Rock laid a territorial claim on Argenta in order to increase its tax base. But Little Rock provided Argenta (then the 8th Ward of LR) with few city services in return for its taxes, so a plot was hatched to regain Argenta's independence. William C. Faucette (prominent businessman, 8th Ward alderman, and 1st mayor of NLR) worked with state legislators to pass the Hoxie-Walnut Ridge Bill in 1903, allowing cities within a mile of one another to consolidate if the residents of both cities approved it at the polls. At a glance, the bill was written to allow the northeast Arkansas towns of Hoxie and Walnut Ridge to consolidate, which they later did. But the bill would also allow the adjacent town of North Little Rock, which had been incorporated in 1901, to turn around and annex the 8<sup>th</sup> Ward in 1904, freeing Argenta from LR's grasp.

In 1906, NLR changed its name back to Argenta. It remained so until 1917, when it was changed to NLR (at the urging of James P. Faucette, who thought it would make property values increase because of the city's association with LR).

### **Faucette's Addition (named after James P. "Jim" Faucette, mayor of NLR from 1911-1917)**

Prior to 1915, the western residential section of Argenta (where we are now) was largely undeveloped. There was a reason for this—

The Memphis & Little Rock Railroad came into Argenta from the east along 4<sup>th</sup> Street and then the tracks curved slightly to the northwest as they continued

toward the Iron Mountain Railroad and the Baring Cross Bridge. So the Memphis & LR tracks used to run diagonally through the 400 blocks of Main, Maple, and Orange streets and came right through the intersection of 5<sup>th</sup> & Willow before continuing northwest. The Rock Island RR Bridge (Clinton Bridge) was built in 1899, making it unnecessary for the M & LR line to cut through the neighborhood, so the line was abandoned. In 1905 the tracks were still here, and abandoned railcars were offered to people for firewood. After the railroad tracks were removed (and presumably, the RR sold the property), residential development occurred (starting about 1915).

Most of the homes on West Fifth Street between Willow and Broadway were built in the 1920s in the Craftsman style of architecture. This was a predominantly working class neighborhood, and the 400 block of W. 5<sup>th</sup> Street was home to a pharmacist, barber, doctor, and railroad employees, among other things.

### **O'Kelley House**

The O'Kelley House was built in 1919 by Owen O'Kelley. Columbus Owen O'Kelley (went by Owen) was born on August 31, 1883, at Judsonia (White County), Arkansas. When he was in his early 20s, O'Kelley moved to North Little Rock and on September 2, 1906, he married Grace Pearl Pyles, who also grew up at Judsonia. Owen and Grace O'Kelley's first home in North Little Rock was located at 1510 Candler (or Chandler) Street, which was just north of the rail yard in Baring Cross (house no longer extant). O'Kelley worked as a timekeeper and a clerk for the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railroad, which later became Missouri Pacific. The timekeeper's job was to schedule work crews and make sure they were working the proper number of hours.

The O'Kelleys had 11 children, 9 of whom survived to adulthood.

**Bernadine** Pearl; born 19 Sept. 1907, died 4 March 2002

**Iris** Anita; born 18 July 1909, died 9 Nov. 1984

Owen O'Kelley, Jr.; born 31 Jan. 1911, died 13 March 1911 (died in infancy)

**Ralph** Odell; born 1 May 1912, died 22 Dec. 1972

Wilda **Kathleen**; born 26 Oct. 1915, died 22 Dec. 2002

**Carroll** Emerson; born 3 Feb. 1919, died 25 June 2012 (male)

James Eugene; born 15 April 1920, died 12 June 1920 (died in infancy)

Marjorie **Jacquelyn**; born 19 Sept. 1921, died 20 Jan. 2010

Dallas **Ted**; born 19 March 1923, died 24 Dec. 1987 (twin)

Dickerson **Ned**; born 19 March 1923, died 10 Oct. 1993 (twin)

**Bobbye** Marilyn; born 14 June 1926, died 4 Aug. 1994 (female & blind)

In January 1919 Owen O’Kelley purchased this lot, which is lot 20, block 5 in Faucette’s Addition, for \$1,250. The warranty deed specified that any residence built on the lot must cost at least \$1,500. Now backtrack to 1908—O’Kelley had just moved to North Little Rock and was working as a carpenter before his job with the railroad. In March 1908 O’Kelley registered for a correspondence course in building contracting through the International Textbook Company. Fast forward to 1919—O’Kelley is working for the railroad, but he has the knowledge required to build a house. And that is exactly what he did. He drew the plans for this American Foursquare house and built it.

Owen O’Kelley worked for the Iron Mountain (Missouri Pacific) Railroad for 18 years. In the early 1920s, O’Kelley also owned a half-interest in the Carroll-O’Kelley Auto Garage at 800 W. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street in North Little Rock. O’Kelley sold his interest in November 1925 and started working as a salesman for Wright Motor Company (he was likely working for the railroad and auto company at the same time). In the late 1920s, O’Kelley stopped working for the railroad and started working as a salesman for Fones Brothers Hardware Company, and by 1931, he was employed by Sears, Roebuck & Company, first as a salesman and later as the manager of the hardware department. At some point in the 1930s, Owen was employed by the WPA as well.

In 1938 the O’Kelley family purchased a house at 411 Donaghey Street in Conway, and most of the family relocated so the older children could be close to college. O’Kelley’s youngest daughter, Bobbye, was blind and continued to live on 5<sup>th</sup> Street. At that time, Owen O’Kelley managed the hardware department at the

Sears in Little Rock, so he lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> Street house with Bobbye during the week and went to Conway during the weekends. In the late 1930s, O'Kelley converted the upstairs of 413 W. 5<sup>th</sup> into boarding rooms to provide a lifetime source of income for Bobbye. From about 1940 until the early 1970s, the upstairs rooms were rented to boarders. The original upstairs floor plan had 5 bedrooms, 1 bathroom, and a sleeping porch across the back of the house. And O'Kelley converted it into 4 bedrooms, 2 kitchenettes, and 2 bathrooms.

Bobbye O'Kelley married Olen Brooks and had two children, Allan and Sherry Brooks. Bobbye and her family lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> Street house and rented rooms to boarders. The rooms were later converted into separate apartment units. In 1947 Owen O'Kelley wrote his will, which established a life estate for his wife, Grace, and granted the 5<sup>th</sup> Street house to Bobbye O'Kelley Brooks and her heirs. In 1950 Owen O'Kelley's eldest child, Bernadine O'Kelley Lenox, was named his legal guardian, as he was at Baptist Hospital in a nursing home situation. Owen O'Kelley died on July 4, 1951, at the age of 68. He was buried at Evergreen Cemetery in Judsonia. O'Kelley's widow, Grace, continued to live in Faulkner County. She died on May 24, 1968, and is buried next to Owen in Judsonia.

In 1952 Bobbye O'Kelley assumed full ownership of the 5<sup>th</sup> Street house. She continued to live in the house and rented out rooms to boarders/apartments. By the mid-1960s, Bobbye had divorced and remarried. Her second husband, Harold Holmes, was a musician. By 1990, Bobbye's son, Allan Brooks, assumed ownership of the property. The house had deteriorated considerably over the years and was condemned in 1990. A minor fire damaged the house in 1991, but Mr. Brooks was excused from making improvements because of financial hardship. Bobbye O'Kelley Holmes died on August 4, 1994.

One year later, in August 1995, Gary and Ann Clements bought the house from Owen O'Kelley's grandson, Allan Brooks, for \$5,500. Keep in mind that the home was valued at \$10,000 in 1950 (equivalent to about \$63,000 in 1995 & \$98,000 today). This tells you what kind of shape the house was in, and what property values were like in this neighborhood at that time.

## Clements Rehabilitation of House

In the mid-1990s, Argenta was a neighborhood in transition. The O'Kelley House was in a severely deteriorated state and was missing its front porch, but Gary, an architect, and Ann, a historian, saw the home's potential and believed that it could be saved. At first, they didn't know exactly what to do with the house...make it into an office, a rental house? The Clements planned to stay in the historic home they had already renovated in Park Hill and work on this place as time allowed. However, they scrapped that plan when—18 months into the project—Ann became pregnant. They would soon need a bigger house, so this project was kicked into high gear.

First, there was the enormous task of cleaning up the yard and the house. Both were full of trash. Then the Clements did a lot of the interior demo work themselves, in order to find the original floor plan. During this process, it was discovered that the home had extensive termite damage, making the couple rethink what would actually be salvageable from the original framing and structural components. For this reason, the interior of the house was entirely reconstructed. This is basically a mid-1990s house inside a 1919 shell.

The original floor plan was restored for the most part based on evidence discovered during the demolition of newer walls AND on the original house plans, which were hand-drawn by Owen O'Kelley and found in the attic. Original plan had 4 equal-sized rooms downstairs and 5 bedrooms, 1 bathroom, and a sleeping porch upstairs.

I mentioned that the front porch was missing when the Clements bought the house, and they didn't know exactly what it looked like. At that time, Jacquelyn O'Kelley Morgan (one of the O'Kelley children), lived in Little Rock and periodically drove by the house to check on things. One day she stopped to visit. She later brought her brother, Carroll O'Kelley, to see the house. Carroll gave the Clements a photo of the house in 1926, showing the O'Kelley family on the front porch. This

photo was used to accurately reconstruct the front porch. And the O'Kelley family shared additional photos and family stories with the Clements.

The Clements were able to restore all of the original wood windows and the sidelights at the front door (sidelights were preserved behind plywood), with the exception of the windows in the old sleeping porch upstairs (they are new). The front door is new, but it was modeled after the sidelights.

The wood trim is new but was milled to replicate the original trim, and it is pine, just as it was originally. The wood floors are new and are oak.

The light fixtures in the parlor and living room are antiques but are not original to this house.

The Clements moved into the house in September 1997, major interior work was completed in November '97, and their son, Austin, was born in December '97.

2,400 square feet x \$50 per square foot = \$120,000 (for initial rehab)

In 1998 the O'Kelley-Clements House became a contributing property in the Argenta Historic District (means it was listed on the NR).

Also in 1998, the NLR Times published an article about the O'Kelley-Clements House, which resulted in phone calls from people who had stayed there when it was a boarding house. One of those people was Minnie Moon. She lived in the O'Kelley House during World War II with her sister, Jewell Larson, and her aunt and uncle, Jewell and Bill Corbitt. In 1946 Minnie Lee Kinchen married Glen Moon in front of the fireplace in the O'Kelley House (was on the wall in the front room, just to the west of the kitchen entrance; fireplace and flue gone by the time the Clements bought the house). All those years ago, Minnie Moon wrote a poem about the O'Kelley House, and it was published in 2000 by the International Poetry Society.

“Old House” by Minnie Moon

I know a house all worn and old  
And weather-beaten with years,  
A house whose childhood laughter  
Has mingled with grown up tears.

It is a house where girlhood secrets  
Still tiptoe on the stair;  
A house where boys, turned men, have left  
Their scuff marks here and there

A comfortable house whose broad roofs shelter  
The people who came there and go,  
A house whose wise old walls still echo  
With whispers of long ago

I love a house where ivy and cedar  
Have made of themselves a part  
I love a house grown old, with memories  
A house with a mellow heart.

Minnie Moon died in 2012.

**Other Details**

2000—workshop built in back yard on site of original outbuilding

2002—screened back porch completed at back of house

2010—attic converted to loft hangout for teenage son, Austin

All of the O'Kelley children and their spouses are dead, except for Ted and Ned O'Kelley's widows (Ted & Ned were twins). Sarah O'Kelley, who was married to Ted O'Kelley, is here with us today, along with her daughters, and several other O'Kelley family members.

Wanda O'Kelley is Ned's widow and is also still living.

Extras:

Foursquare

O'Kelley kids were talented dancers

David Soos made stained glass in downstairs bathroom for the Clements

Gary is the bottle, rock, and electrical insulator collector.

Next tour is Friday, June 6 at the Barney Elias House, 335 Goshen Ave., NLR.