

This Place Matters

By Susan Blake, Historic Preservation Board



This month's featured historic home is the James Henry and Jessie Campbell House at 91 South Second Street. It is the most significant historic home directly related to town founder, Benjamin Campbell.

Built in 1895, it sits on what was once part of a 160-acre ranch that Benjamin purchased from the United States Government in 1870. The 20,000 square foot lot was a gift from Benjamin to his son James Henry Campbell and his wife Jessie Agnes McKenzie. James used the land for dairy farming for many years, but when he married Jessie he decided to subdivide parcels.

The two-story Queen Anne Cottage style home is a fine example by local builder George Whitney who built many of Campbell's original historic homes. Several of these homes still stand in downtown. Whitney's attention to detail and craftsmanship can be seen in the porch brackets, the turned wooden pillars and the wrap-around front veranda, and the unique cut eve shingles which was a builder's signature in that time.

A large basement was added to the house around 1905. James and Jessie created a "milk room" under the coolest, north portion of the house, since there was no refrigeration at the time. It served as a cooling room for milk from their Jersey cows to be stored and kept for a short time. According to Jeannette Watson's book, Campbell the Orchard City, Jessie used large pans for the milk which were placed on rotating racks. Later, the cream would be skimmed off the top and churned into butter. James and Jessie sold the milk, cream and butter to the townspeople. Benjamin Campbell and his wife Mary who lived a block and a half away on what is now Campbell Avenue, would frequently stop by.

Remarkably, this house has had only two owners. It remained in the Campbell family until the 1950's, when Joseph P. and Connie Russo purchased it completely furnished for \$112,000 from Jessie Agnes Campbell, who was now a widow. Mr. and Mrs. Russo worked in real estate and Joseph saw something unique and charming about the old house and grounds. They lovingly

restored it and enjoyed sitting on the front porch watching traffic, according to their son, Joe Russo Jr.

After his parents passed away in the early 2000's, Joe Jr. and his wife Mary Ann became the sole owners of the property when Joe's brother who lived in Visalia declared he was not interested in it. This next generation of the Russo family has done extensive restoration, seismic retrofitting and needed upgrades to the house. While doing the seismic retrofitting to the basement, the Russo's came across an old 7 lb. flat iron and the top of a wooden barrel. The top shows the words, "Farmers Union Campbell".

The Farmers Union was one of the first commercial businesses in a newly created downtown business district on Campbell Ave. The Farmers Union store started in 1894. It offered free horse drawn delivery to locals, since traveling to San Jose for supplies was an all day journey at that time. It advertised groceries, general merchandise, hardware, grain and feed.



The two stately Palm trees that frame the front yard of the house were planted in 1895. This house is a historical treasure in our city.