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THE STORY BEHIND THE LIGHTS ADORNING PICARDY DRIVE

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NO DOUBT YOU know about a little community in Oakland where neighbors stretch a metaphoric hand - represented by a string of electric lights - to their neighbors. It's **Picardy Drive**, with its 71 homes decked out for the holidays.

An important component of this street's decorating is the informal rule that the lights are strung between houses, so they are all connected - like Lake Merritt's necklace of lights. Originally called Normandy Gardens, this neighborhood was built in 1926 by builder R. C. Hillen and designed by architect Walter Dixon. The 10-acre plot contains French- and English-style homes, "distinguished by the adaptation of Old World types of architecture to modern American residential conditions," according to a 1926 newspaper advertisement.

What that means is that these homes look like miniature rustic castles, with half-timbering, towers - even crenellated parapets! One can almost picture Robin Hood slipping around, replacing burned-out bulbs.

Another 1926 ad describes the new enclave: "Copied from the best old-world types, these houses are never 'freaky,' but are real homes, combining exterior charm with the best of modern arrangement and conveniences. Many features in Normandy Gardens homes are ordinarily found only in far costlier residences. The studio living rooms, for instance, have cathedral beamed or English arch ceilings ...

"Of quaint charm are the glossy-tile ingle nooks raised a step from the living room floor level ... In each rear garden is a unique beauty spot - either an Amazon water garden, attractive fish pond or bird bath," the ad said.

Maxwell Park resident (and Pixar employee) M. T. Silvia made a documentary, "**Picardy Drive**," that showcases the homes' "Christmas Tree Lane" reputation, but also goes deeper to explore dynamics in this diverse middle-class neighborhood. The bulk of the footage was shot in December 2001 and January 2002, and post-Sept. 11 contemplation creeps into several residents' on-camera interviews.

In an e-mail, Silvia told me, "My initial intention was to make a 5-minute short about just the lights, and it ended up with a life of its own, evolving into 56 minutes of much more than the lights. In the interview process, we asked everyone the same set of questions, and because 9/11 had just happened, we asked everyone how this particular holiday season was affected by that.

"My approach was simple and naive in many ways; I had no idea what would evolve from all of the footage we shot," she wrote. "My only clear goal was I didn't want to use any narration or voiceover; I wanted the residents to tell the story and that was the biggest challenge in the editing process. I tried my best to keep my own voice out of it."

People first began decorating the street for the holidays about 60 years ago. In the video, residents describe moving into the neighborhood and learning what might be expected from them in early December.

One woman said in her first year, neighbors came by with a ladder and helped put up the lights. She said, "We realized we had come to a really special place where people did things together." Another neighbor said, "It's a chore to get up 25 feet on a ladder to put up lights, but then I realized it's the participation that's important."

The lighting of a Christmas tree in one of the two islands in the middle of the street is another community activity, with residents bringing potluck treats to share.

Of course, this being the land of the free, not everyone who lives on **Picardy** Drive wants to take part. Although in recent years residents have become more aware of the desire to keep the decorations non-denominational, some residents in the video point out the largely Christian feel of the light display.

One man admits there is subtle pressure to comply. Another person says, "Regardless of your ethnic background, your sexual orientation, when you string your line to your neighbors, you become part of a community."

Now that the video has been out for two holiday seasons, Silvia can reflect on it. What's most compelling about the video, she said, is that it "portrays such a positive image of 'violent' East Oakland."

And here's part of her list of the postscripts: "One resident gave me a big hug, thanking me for increasing his property value. Another resident told me this was the first year she and her husband had put up the lights without an argument. Another resident said he had watched it again recently and realized that the reactions to 9/11 make the video an important historical document."

The film won Best of Festival (in the documentary category) at the Berkeley Video and Film Festival 2003, and this year Silvia is planning to go to Sundance, hoping to find a distributor for it there.

Silvia said, "**Picardy** during the holidays has now become a tradition in my life. Walking over there is a heartwarming experience that makes me so very grateful for living in this community."

It's not just special to her; for many residents, it's a holiday tradition to walk or drive down **Picardy** Drive and see the decorations. And if you journey down the street, you may find yourself expressing the same sentiment as one of the homeowners in the video, "I've always wanted a little castle!"

The video appears on KQED, Channel 9, at 11 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 23. You may purchase it for \$24 at Laurel Bookstore, 4100 MacArthur Blvd.

For more information, visit www.smartgirlproductions.com. Many thanks to Luann Strauss of Laurel Bookstore for showing me the video!

Reach Erika Mailman, whose history column appears every two weeks, at ccnmontclarion@cctimes.com or 510-748-1683.

Photo. This December 1947 photograph shows European-style homes on **Picardy** Drive and Seminary Avenue. One of the two distinctive islands in the middle of the street is on the left. (Oakland History Room/Oakland Public Library).