

BIOGRAPHY OF EDWARD DONALD ERICKSON

By Karyn L. Erickson

Introduction:

Don Erickson lived in Barrington between 1966 and 2006, a span of 40 years, and considered Barrington his "home." Although he influenced many people in his seventy-seven years of life, Don's greatest love was architecture, followed by science; he had a particular fascination with the creation of the universe, and was an avid reader of anything written by Stephen Hawkins. Don apprenticed with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin between 1948 through 1951. Following is a biography of Don's life, a man who not only chose to live in Barrington, but who also chose to be buried here, to remain close to the home that he designed, built and kept in a constant state of renewal. Don considered his home his "laboratory," a place where he experimented with designs before incorporating these ideas into buildings for his clients.

Biography:

Don Erickson was born on August 29, 1929 in Chicago, Illinois to two Swedish immigrants who settled in Chicago and who met, there, through the Swedish community. His full name was Edward Donald Erickson, but, by Swedish tradition, males were called by their middle name; Donald was shortened to "Don."

Don's mother, Ebba Linnea Erickson (nee Larson) immigrated to the United States from her birthplace in Olmstad, Sweden in 1923. Ebba worked for the Brach candy family as a personal maid to Mrs. Brach, prior to Ebba's marriage to Gunnar. Born on January 14, 1902, Ebba was slightly older than her husband, Gunnar, who was born on April 9, 1904. Don's parents were married on May 28, 1927.¹

Eric Gunnar Erickson came to the United States during 1922 from Sweden; he was followed by three other brothers, Martin, Frits, and Gottfried, and two sisters, Signey and Regina. All of Gunnar's siblings similarly settled in Chicago. Frits Herbert Erickson was the father of Richard Erickson, Don's cousin, who came to work for Don as Don's chief draftsman from 1953 through mid-1992.



According to 1930 U.S. census records, Eric and Ebba lived in the 40th Ward, 50th Precinct on block 93 of Chicago.

Sometime after June 23, 1930, Ebba took her son to Sweden to live with Ebba's parents for close to a year. Ebba and Don returned to the United States, sailing on the T.M.S. Kungsholm ship from Gothenburg, Sweden to the port of New York, and arriving on August 18, 1931.² When Don arrived, he sported long, red ringlets, and wore knickers and socks, all of which made him a target for other children's taunts.

One of Don's earliest recollections was about the death of his grandmother Anna Lisa Erickson (nee Danielson). Don, his parent's and Anna lived over a grocery store. While Don's parent's slept in the only bedroom in the flat, Don and Anna slept in the living room on cots. There was one, wood burning stove to keep the flat warm in winter.

One morning, Don, who was nearly three-years old at the time, awakened, and went to greet his grandmother "good morning," but Anna failed to awaken. Don touched Anna; he said that she "seemed so cold." Frightened, Don ran into his parent's bedroom, exclaiming "Grandma cold, so cold!"³ Anna died in her sleep on June 17, 1932⁴ at their home on 3041

¹ Ebba Linnea Erickson eulogy.

² New York Passenger Lists, www.ancestry.com

³ As told by Don Erickson, to Karyn and Shay Erickson, 1992.

⁴ Death Certificate, Illinois Vital Records.

Natchez Street in Chicago and is buried at Rosehill Cemetery,⁵ which was near their family home. Anna's husband, Eric, had died before Anna in Sweden.

Don recounted that Gunnar worked as a cabinet maker for a firm that made pin-ball machines in Chicago and at a barrel factory making staves. Having only a grade school education, Gunnar decided to secure his high school degree; he worked during the day and went to high school at night until he graduated. While Ebba and Don were living in Sweden, Gunnar began to establish his own business, building kitchen cabinets for private residences. Eventually, the family moved to Elmwood Park, Illinois where Gunnar established his own firm which specialized in the design of free-standing spiral wood staircases which he hand-built for custom-homes in the Chicago area.

In 1940, Ebba was naturalized as a U.S. citizen; presumably, Gunnar was naturalized at nearly the same time. At the time of Ebba's naturalization, the family was living in Elmwood Park.⁶

Don attended John Mills grade school⁷ and, upon graduating, attended Proviso East High School, in Maywood. In 1947, Don graduated from Proviso; by then, he had become enchanted with a private residence nearby, which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, and which Don saw on his way home from school everyday.

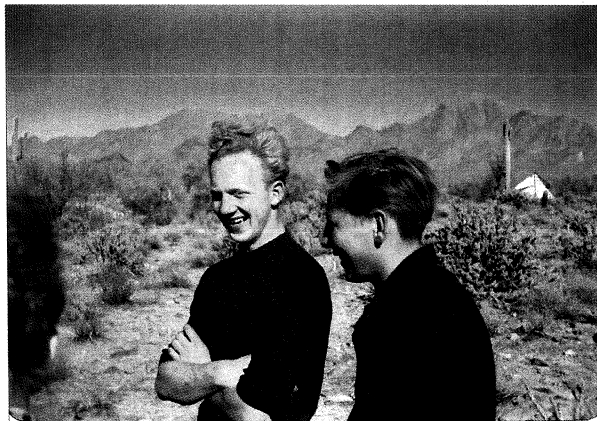
Intent on their only child attending college, Ebba encouraged her son to study the piano since the age of four; by 1947, Don played Chopin, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky and had entertained the notion of becoming a concert pianist. However, Gunnar had other career aspirations for his son; he strongly encouraged Don to become an architect and was successful at convincing his son to go into the profession.

After graduating from high school, Don took entrance exams, applied for and was accepted into the school of architecture at the University of Illinois at Navy Pier in Chicago. As he relayed in his oral history recorded by the "Frank Lloyd Wright Oral Archives History Program," Don's professor, Marion Gutnayer, criticized one of Don's classroom drawings.

Don said, "Well, Frank Lloyd Wright would have done it this way!"

Reportedly, Marion threw up his hands and said, "If you like him so much, go to him!"

Don took Marion's advice, after spending one year in the University's architecture program.



Gunnar, Don's cousin, Richard Erickson, and Don drove up to Spring Green, Wisconsin to tour Taliesin and to meet Mr. Wright in the summer of 1948. After meeting Mr. Wright and showing him his portfolio, Don was accepted as an apprentice to Taliesin, on one condition, "that Mr. Wright also accept his cousin, Richard, as an apprentice, too." Mr. Wright complied with the condition, and both young men were accepted in the apprenticeship program beginning December 15, 1948, at Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Don and his cousin, Richard Erickson at Taliesin West

Don studied at Taliesin from 1948 through 1951, when he was commissioned to design and build his first home for his parents in Inverness, Illinois. The Inverness home, which is

⁵ Anna is interred in Sec 7, Row 30, Grave 36 at Rosehill and was 72 years old.

⁶ 2835 North 77th Avenue, Elmwood Park, IL.

⁷ John Mills grade school is located at 2824 North 76th Avenue in Elmwood Park, IL.

occupied as of this writing, was a "starter home," and built to show to prospective clients to help market Don's future work. Sometime during his apprenticeship, Richard was inducted into the army.

While at Taliesin East, Don met Shirley Mae Dahlke, a fine artist, who was a camp counselor at Hilltop Camp in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Hilltop was run by another, former apprentice of Wright, Herbert Fritz and his wife, Eloise. Shirley and a friend toured Taliesin; their tour-guide was Don. About a week later, Don encountered Shirley in the town of Spring Green, after she had taken the Hilltop campers to the movies. Emboldened, and in spite of a Taliesin rule forbidding the apprentices from dating, Don borrowed a pick-up truck from another apprentice, drove into Hilltop camp, and asked Shirley for a date. She agreed; both individuals not only had their passion for their profession in common, but both had studied classical piano from the age of four, and were similarly passionate about music.



After leaving Taliesin, Don worked for the architects Schewier and Eating, Frank Louis Glick, and Victor L. Charn of Ragnar Benson and for E. Zari & Son as a construction superintendent and estimator. Shirley moved to Chicago and worked as a secretary to the President of the Sentinel radio station. Don and Shirley were married on December 13, 1952 at St. John's Evangelical Church, in Princeton, Wisconsin, which was near Shirley's family home.

*The Inverness Home Circa 1951
Photo by Jim Herrlin*

The couple established residence in a one room apartment near Inverness; their apartment was located over a machine shed on a farm.⁸ They eventually moved into their first home in Palatine, Illinois which was designed by Don. Shirley said that when she was pregnant with her first child, she was on the roof, helping to shingle their new home. This open, simple home had concrete floors, floor to ceiling windows in the large living room, and a sky light in the master bedroom. Don's first office was located to the left of the entrance hall. It was in this office space, that he first established his architectural practice; his cousin, Richard, became his chief draftsman. Don and Shirley's first child, Karyn, was born in October, 1953; she remembers being clothed in soft, footed pajamas, and crawling under the drafting tables in the office. The couple's second child, Don, was born in January, 1956. The Palatine house, located near the highway on a wooded lot on Plum Grove Road, was demolished in the 1980's.

When Don was working for E. Zari & Son, he was asked to supervise the construction of the Glore's home which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and built in Lake Forest, IL. Dee-di (Mrs. Glore) and Don sat at the kitchen table in the Palatine house, and poured over the plans, to determine how to bid out the job, and come within or under budget. At the time, the Glores were renting the Lloyd Lewis house on the North Shore until their new home was built.⁹ Gunnar also built the stairway for the Glore's home.

The Erickson family lived in their Palatine home until 1956 when they moved to a home on George Street in Mt. Prospect, Illinois.¹⁰ The Palatine home had been broken into twice. The first time, only Shirley and their first child, who was six-months old, were home; their lives were threatened by the intruder and Shirley's jewelry was stolen. To scare him off, Shirley told the intruder that her husband was a policeman and due home from lunch soon. This, and the subsequent break-in, stimulated the family's move to Mt. Prospect.

⁸ One of Don's first office locations was 6645 Simpson, Morton Grove, IL, circa 1954. (Golf & Waukegan.) See Stationary dated 1955.

⁹ As told by Shirley Erickson and as referred to by Don in the FLW Oral History Archives.

¹⁰ 301 S. George Street, Mt. Prospect, IL.

Before moving to Mt. Prospect, Don designed a factory and office building on Busse Highway in Des Plaines, Illinois which Don and his father shared for many years until Don established a partnership with another Taliesin apprentice, Dennis Stevens, in 1965. Don's father employed Robert Erickson, son of Gottfried and Ragnhild, while Richard Erickson, continued to work as chief draftsman for Don. Shirley worked as the secretary to the firm, for a number of years, and held numerous client dinners at the Mt. Prospect residences to help market Don's architectural business. In an article published in 1958, Don said, "My wife, Shirley, has been my main inspiration. I always do my best work when she is sitting beside me and I always show her sketches, and need her judgment."¹¹

After establishing his partnership, Don built separate offices for Erickson & Stevens on Pearson Street and later at Le Ronde building in Des Plaines.¹² During the early 1980's, Erickson & Stevens later established a new office next to the Bob Chin Crab House in Wheeling.¹³ This office complex was designed by Don as were the other office buildings; Don had branched out beyond being an architect, to being a developer, as well as a construction manager.

The Erickson family eventually moved from the George Street house in Mt. Prospect to an apartment duplex on School Street and, thereafter, they rented a home on Edward Street in the same community. The children attended St. Paul's Lutheran Parochial School and Karyn also attended Central Junior High School in Mt. Prospect.



While Don was establishing his architectural practice, Don and Shirley purchased two, adjacent 5-acre parcels of land in the unincorporated area of North Barrington, Illinois, during the late 1950's. Having been raised in the city, Don yearned for the openness and peaceful repose of country living; Shirley never enjoyed city living, having mostly been raised in the small, rural town of Neshkoro, Wisconsin.

The family would visit the property often. Don built a tree house for his children, while Shirley envisioned the horse farm that she longed to develop. The family picked wild raspberries which grew in thickets in the wooded acreage; and tended to the Lilies of the Valley that a prior resident had planted and which grew in a shaded area of the woods. In spring, the family picked wild asparagus, and in summer, they flew balsa wood airplanes which Don built with his children.

Shirley cutting weeds in Barrington (photo)

Don and Shirley's third child, Elizabeth, was born in September, 1964. At that time, Don spent nearly a year flying back-and-forth to New York City, in a plane chartered by Singer, to design one-half of the Singer Bowl for the 1965 World's Fair. That building is still standing, is located in Flushing, Queens, and is used for the Tennis Open championships; so many modifications were made to the building that it barely resembles the structure designed for Singer.

The concept for the first Barrington home was a "tower," which would be built on the hill overlooking the nearby pond, and which would be set back from other, neighboring homes. The master bedroom was the "penthouse" suite. Don told his children that when Shirley came home with groceries, she would drive into the garage and take an elevator up to the kitchen.

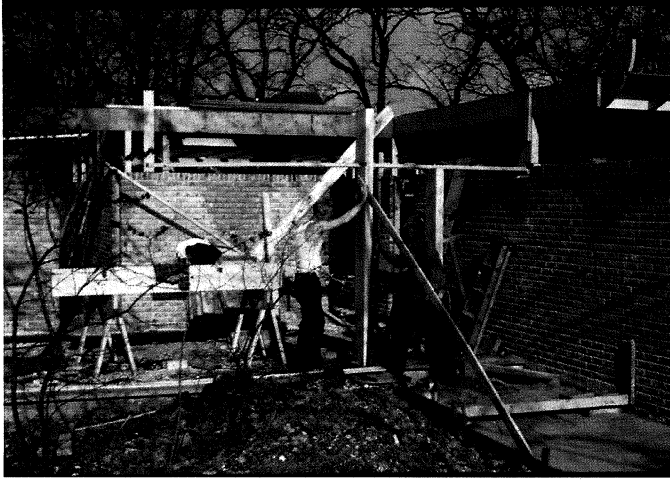
¹¹ July 8, 1958, "The Chicago American."

¹² Erickson & Stevens, 1873 Busse Highway, Des Plaines, IL 60016. Emmco Stairs. Also, Erickson & Stevens, Inc., 640 Pearson Street, Des Plaines, IL. 60016. Also, Erickson & Stevens, Inc., 950 Lee Street, Des Plaines, IL. 60016.

¹³ Bob Chin Crab House, 393 S. Milwaukee Avenue, Wheeling, IL.

The couple settled on having a flat-roofed home with brick floors, and worm-eaten, cedar wood walls, that did not require painting.

Don and the carpenter putting up studs in the first home (photo).



Don, Shirley and their children were all involved in building the home, from installing the plumbing to laying the brick floors. Even in winter, the family worked on the home. They were warmed by "Sallies," large, portable, burners that burned liquid petroleum and which threw off both heat and the acrid smell of the fuel. Don patiently instructed both his wife and children how to hammer a nail without leaving a "carpenter's mark," and how to properly seat a brick in the floor. The family finally moved into the home in 1966; a home which not only Don had designed but

the family built side-by-side with other workpeople, all hand-selected by Don to ensure that the construction of the home was done up to Don's exacting standards.

While residing in Barrington, the older children attended Barrington Middle and High Schools until 1970, while Elizabeth attended North Barrington grade school.



Roughly 8-months after their home was built, a tornado leveled the home on April 21, 1967 at 5:03 p.m. Don was entertaining a client, and Shirley and her children were at a doctor's office in Arlington Heights; one of the children had fractured her arm. When Shirley and the children returned to Barrington, only the corner of the horse barn was standing, leaving two terrified horses whinnying in the rain. Don returned home, later that evening, where Shirley waited with three civil defense workers. When he saw these four people,

Don shouted, "Where are the children?" but Don did not know who Shirley was. He suffered from temporary amnesia for ten days, from the shock of nearly losing his family, and from the loss of the home that he had personally invested in and loved. As relayed by Shirley, each morning that the couple would awaken, Don would ask his wife, "Who are you?" One morning, Shirley answered, "Marilyn Monroe," and said, that "Don didn't know the difference!" until ten days later, when he regained his memory.

After the tornado, the family moved into Brentwood Estates, on Lake-Cook Road in Palatine, into a suburban home designed by Don, and lived there for about one year while they rebuilt their Barrington home.

The family spent the summer of 1967 clearing the land from debris left from the tornado, demolishing what remained from the original home, and readying the original foundation for a

new home. This home was designed with what Don called "Jamaican roofs." The roofs had massive wood beams which were hand-molded to curve upwards into a peaked roof, which was topped with a skylight, and hand-applied wood shingles. The family moved into their new Barrington home in 1968.



Don and his father, Gunnar, at the Barrington home (circa 1970's).

Ebba, Don's mother, died on August 27, 1969, and is interred at Mt. Emblem cemetery.

Shirley, trained as a fine artist at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, as well as at the Banff School of Fine Arts in Canada, regularly exhibited her work. She won "Best in Show" in the August 1968 Barrington Art Fair and her painting was featured on the cover of the Barrington Courier in 1969. Her oldest daughter won third place for her drawings in the children's art competition at the same juried art fair.

In October 1970, Don and Shirley divorced after eighteen-years of marriage. Shirley and the children moved to Princeton, Wisconsin, their five horses in tow. Don remained in the Barrington home, and continued to operate his business in Des Plaines, and later in Wheeling, Illinois.

In 1970, after having taught interior design at the University of Illinois at DeKalb, Don met Sharon Ann Dam, a communications student at the university, who was a friend of one of Don's interior design students. Don and Sharon were later married in Jamaica about 1972. They had one child together, Shay, born in January 1977. After about twelve years of marriage, Sharon and Don obtained a divorce sometime around 1984, retaining joint custody of their only child. Unlike Shirley, who was two years older than Don, Sharon was twenty year's Don's junior.

Photo depicts Ebba and Gunnar on their wedding day. Doris was Ebba's maid of honor, Frits was Gunnar's best man.



Gunnar, Don's father, died on February 1, 1986 and is buried next to Ebba, his first wife, at Mt. Emblem cemetery.¹⁴ Gunnar's brother, Frits Herbert Erickson, and his wife, Doris (nee) Carlson, the parent's of Richard Erickson, are also interred at Mt. Emblem.

Don met Patricia Ann Mors (nee Lusk) through her husband, Wayne, an orthodontist in Northern Illinois. Mr. Mors consulted with Don about building an addition to his home. After Don's second divorce, and Patricia's separation from her husband, Patricia reconnected with Don while she was attending Arizona State University and studying interior design. Patricia asked Don to accompany her to a New Year's party on December 31, 1988.¹⁵ Patricia flew in from Arizona to greet Don at the front door with her arms full of flowers and left the next day, after they saw in the New Year together. In summer 1989, after Patricia interned at Erickson & Stevens in Wheeling, Patricia and Don announced their intention to

¹⁴ Mt. Emblem, Grand Avenue and County Line Roads, Elmhurst, Illinois. Graves 4, 5 and 6, Lot 288, Section F.

¹⁵ As per Elizabeth Erickson who recounted her first introduction to Patricia.

marry, holding a reception in December 1989 to formalize their intention.¹⁶ They were legally married on Patricia's birthday in June 1994, when Patricia was 35 years of age, and her husband was 65. Don had no thoughts of retirement; it was his architectural work that seemed to fuel his soul.

In mid-1992, Don broke off his partnership with Dennis Stevens, and established his architectural practice in the studio of his Barrington home. That same year, and while supervising the re-roofing of his home; Don fell from the roof and broke his back; this accident led to his eventual diagnosis, in 1993, of a terminal cancer called multiple myeloma.

Don continued to operate his business while valiantly battling his disease and was one of the one-percent of patients diagnosed with multiple myeloma to live more than ten years after diagnosis.

During the 1990's, Don served on the board of the Society of Registered Architects (SARA). His tenure on SARA's board helped to inspire Don to create a new architectural association with a different mission. In 1998, Don co-founded I.C.A.R.A. which later was renamed to the Association of Licensed Architects, and which now claims well over 6,000 professional members. Don had also served as an arbitrator for the American Institute of Architects.

Don died in his Barrington home on October 24, 2006, surrounded by family and friends, and is buried at White Cemetery on Cuba Road, in Barrington, just one and one-half miles from the home that he loved.

Partial List of Buildings:

Decoral Corporation, now U.S. Music Corporation, 444 E. Courtland Street, Mundelein, IL

"Bird Cage Apartments," 6900 N. Ridge Boulevard, Chicago IL

Information Resources, Inc., 150 N. Clinton Street, Chicago, IL (interior and entranceway)

Singer Bowl, 1965 World's Fair, New York, New York. Singer Sewing Machine Company.

Indian Lakes Resort, 250 West Schick Road, Bloomingdale, IL 60108

Published Works:

"The Chicago American," "This Architect Cuts Corners; Round House Wins Prize," July 8, 1958.

"Chicago Daily News," "Wright Influenced this Luxury Home," July 18, 1958

"Custom-House Winners, AIA 1958 Homes for Better Living Awards," sponsored by the American Institute of Architects in cooperation with House and Home and Life magazines. Merit award for the Round House.

Award of Merit, Des Plaines Chamber of Commerce Architectural Award, 1959.

Award of Merit, "House & Home," Jamaican Home, 1967.

"Chicago Tribune," "Award Winner on a Ravine," Anna Douglas, June 22, 1968, Distinguished Building Award, Chicago Association of Commerce and Industry, the Chicago Chapter, American Institute of Architects.

"Playboy," "A playboy pad; Exotica in Exurbia; A young Midwest exec creates his own tropical paradise in Illinois," circa 1970's.

¹⁶ "Patricia Ann and Donald E. Erickson announce their marriage on Wednesday, the 27th day of December, 1989. Come celebrate with us on Saturday, January 18, 1990 at 5:30 p.m." Marriage Certificate, Lake County, Illinois dated June 23, 1994.

"Good form: The Prairie style of architecture is still influential after all these years," Lisa Skolnik, Chicago Tribune, May 31, 1992, Sunday, Final Edition.

"Lake Zurich presses pizzeria to stick to alpine theme," Marjorie Lipskey, Daily Herald, Sept. 29, 1992.

"Don Erickson," The Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, Oral History Program, March 23, 1994. Video to accompany transcripts.

"New counseling center opens up," Daily Herald, Sept. 19, 1994. (Horizons)

"I.C.A.R.A.," March/April 1997, Featured Architect, "Don Erickson, Barrington, IL," pages 8 - 26.

"The Greenhouse Effect Basking, Even in the Middle of Chicago Winters, in the Warmth and Brightness of Your Own Sunspace," William Aldrich, Sunday Magazine, Chicago Tribune, March 8, 1987, Final Edition.

"This House resists the pitter-patter of little . . . hooves," Mary Umberger, Chicago Tribune, New Homes, Sept. 12, 1998.

Journal of the Taliesin Fellows, The Work of Don Erickson, Spring 1999, pp. 3-10

"Friends of Kebyar," Volume 20.2, Issue No. 69, 2002, "The Architecture of Don Erickson."

"Right place, right time: First Hospitality Group enlists The Gettys Group to restore sparkle to a local diamond in the rough," Grace Wagner, Lodging Hospitality, Nov. 1, 2002.

"Lifestyle: "The Wright stuff; Renovation of Indian Lakes Resort bears the stamp of Frank Lloyd Wright," by Katie Klabusich, Press Publications/Northwest DuPage, Thursday, January 16, 2003.

"Daily Herald," "2000 Couples Later . . . Indian Lakes marks 25 years of weddings, receptions," December 18, 2005.

"An architect Don Erickson: In the large shadow of Frank Lloyd Wright, a former student forges his own destiny," by Juli Schatz (publication unknown).

"Chicago Sun Times," Special Advertising Supplement, 2005. "Indian Lakes has the 'Wright' touch; Four-star, Chicago-area gold resort completes \$20 million renovation project."

Book of Successful Fireplaces; How to Build, Decorate, and Use Them; 19th edition, by R. J. Lytle and Marie-Jeanne Lytle.

"Chicago Tribune," Obituary; Don Erickson: 1929 - 2006, Architect designed Indian Lakes resort," by Graydon Megan.

"Tribute to Don Erickson: 1929 - 2006," Licensed Architect, Vol. 10, No. 4, 4th Quarter - 2006, published by the Association of Licensed Architects.

The Fellowship: The Untold Story of Frank Lloyd Wright & the Taliesin Fellowship, by Roger Friedland & Harold Zellman, 2006; Don Erickson, pages 435, 438. HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Magazines:

House and Home
House & Garden

House Beautiful
Architectural Forum

Professional Journals:

American Registered Architect
A.I.A. Journal

Foreign Publications:

"Alit I Hemmet," Sweden
"Nuestra Arquitectura," Brazil

Trade Journals:

Design for Living
Stone Magazine
Plastering Industries
Metal Lath News
Building Progress
Building Magazine