

Historic Pittsburg buildings honored

By NIKKI PATRICK | Morning Sun Family Living Editor

Three Pittsburg buildings, one a place of business and the other two private homes, have been honored in conjunction with National Historic Preservation Week, which runs May 12-18.

Laura Carlson of the Stilwell Heritage and Educational Foundation recently presented certificates to Michael and Kathleen Bishop for the renovation of the facade of their photography studio and to Lura and Bert Patrick and Jack and Doris Overman for their historic homes.

"We are so pleased this year to have two preservation activities that are so deserving of recognition," Carlson said.

The Patrick and Overman homes, which together comprise the Whitesitt-Shirk Historic District, are also listed on the National Register of Historic Places of the U.S. Department of Interior.

Whitesitt-Shirk Historic District

Getting her home, and that of her next-door neighbors, Jack and Doris Overman, on the National Register was "quite a job," said Lura Patrick.

She said that she started working on the project about 10 years ago "and really plunged into it 3 1/2 years ago."

Patrick said that she did so much research she even knows the names of the plumbers who worked on the houses. She also had to provide a detailed description of each room of the houses. "I've really learned a lot of architectural terms," she said.

The Patrick family has lived in the home at 120 E. Lindburg for the past 32 years. Patrick said that the late Gene DeGruson, noted area historian, used to tell her stories of the area, which was once known as "Professors' Row."

The four houses in this first block of E. Lindburg off Broadway were built by W.A. Brandenburg, first president of the school that has grown into Pittsburg State University, J.A. Garfield Shirk, Andrew Whitesitt and James Yates.

"Those four men were liked the grandfathers of the university," Jack Overman commented.

Patrick said that sites may be nominated for the Register of Historic Places on four criteria: historical importance of a person associated with the site, architectural significance, a historic occurrence at the site or an archaeological site.

"We chose to use two of those criteria -- the historic importance of these men and the architecture," Patrick said.

The Whitesitt and Shirk houses date from 1916. The Whitesitt house, Patrick said, is a prime example of early 20th Century architecture with elements of the Craftsman style, while the Shirk house is a classic example of a pre-World War I Craftsman style bungalow.

"These homes were at the cutting edge of architecture at that time, and incorporated the most up-to-date building techniques and styles," Patrick said. "Most of the other houses in Pittsburg were company houses built in the square and T-shaped styles. This was the edge of town, and in fact there were cornfields just to the east of these houses when they were built."

Whitesitt, born in Indiana, came to Pittsburg in 1913 as director of woodworking at Kansas State Manual Training Normal School. He became one of the first leaders in the area of industrial education in the United States and headed the university's industrial arts department from 1918 until 1935. During that time he greatly expanded the department's offerings.

"Basically, Professor Whitesitt added just about everything that's offered now, except for plastics and computers," Patrick said.

After his retirement from department chairman, Whitesitt remained on the university's staff until his death in 1942. In 1964, the Industrial Arts Building, second building on the university campus, was rededicated as Whitesitt Hall by the Kansas Board of Regents.

Shirk, born in McPherson, came to Pittsburg in 1912 as assistant professor of physics and mathematics, and became chairman of the department in 1914. During World War II he was head of the civilian pilot training program based on the Pittsburg campus.

He retired as department chair in 1946 but remained a full-time instructor until his death in 1950. In 1958 a new men's residence hall was built and named in Shirk's honor.

"I had a statistics class from Dr. Shirk, and here I ended up living in his house," Overman said. He and his wife purchased the home in 1955.

He described Shirk as a genius, and very much ahead of his time.

"He created many inventions for his home," Patrick said. "He had an electric garage-door opener in 1916."

"There were doorbells for both the front and back doors, and they had different rings, so you could tell which door you needed to answer," Overman said. "Back then, all they had was radio, and Dr. Shirk built in a powerful aerial, with plug-ins so that you could move the radio from room to room and just plug it in."

The house also had an early version of a garbage disposal and gas and coal furnaces, each with its own thermostat.

Remarkably, these devices still work. "I still use everything," Overman said.

The Whitesitt-Shirk Historic District was placed on the Kansas Register of Historic Places on Dec. 1, 2001, and on the National Register on March 20.