

WEST PRESCOTT HISTORY PER WILLIAM AVEN AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND PRESCOTT HISTORY RESEARCH

BY Elisabeth F. Ruffner - 02.16

William P. Aven, as a youth of fifteen left his home country of Macedonia, walked into Italy and made his way to the United States where he enlisted in the Army, thereby becoming a U.S. citizen. After suffering from mustard gas poisoning in France in 1920 and resulting tuberculosis, he was sent to Fort Whipple, and as a patient there became interested in architecture. Throughout his years of enforced rest which was then the only cure for tuberculosis, he studied magazines and architecture publications and signed up for a correspondence course in design and building. Upon discharge he built a home in Prescott, married and started a family, but realizing his physical limitations, decided that he would get a job selling rather than in active construction, obtained a real estate license and became associated with Kenneth Aitken in a development and insurance business.

Aitken was a native of Prescott, the son of pioneer residents. He was educated in Prescott schools and attended a business college in Los Angeles. On returning to Prescott he continued his family insurance business until this appointment as the clerk of the Yavapai County Board of Supervisors, serving in that capacity until 1952. In the firm of Aitken and Aven, Real Estate and Insurance, Aven continued the "outside work" because they found he could operate all of their business of realty and insurance without his partner in daily attendance, but Aitken came in on weekends to their office in the Hassayampa Hotel to manage the firm's bookkeeping.

Aitken and Aven, in the real estate, construction and insurance business, in 1929, purchased the apartment building at 121-129 East Goodwin Street and named it Kenwill Apartments. Aven resided there with his two daughters until the mid 1930s. In early 1927, Aven had received a listing for sale of "one full block on Park Avenue between Glendale Avenue and Country Club Road". Purchasing the land, Aitken and Aven became the first and major developer of Prescott's west side, they sold lots to young people of the town and also sold two houses from plans he had designed. Aven built his family home on the corner of Park Avenue and Hill.

From Park Avenue west there was a "trail road with land on both sides available for subdividing." The company was able to purchase 22 acres south of the trail, and in 1927, Ridgewood Heights subdivision was platted, water, power and sewer lines installed and streets paved. Adjoining property to the south was acquired and named, respectively Parkview Addition and Ridgewood Heights Addition. These new developments were advertised as "Prescott's newest and best subdivisions" and were located on Crest Avenue, now Country Club Drive, between Park Avenue and Vista Drive.

Aven's account continues, "During the Depression years, money was so scarce we had a hard time paying taxes on all the properties we owned". By careful planning the partners were able to trade lots to cover debts, build an average of one house a month, styling them "modest English style dwellings", making a profit by providing the lot, building the house and writing the insurance on each property. Counseling the buyers as he sold them the property, Aven was able to prevent any foreclosures due to the depressed economy. "During the entire Depression years there was not even one repossession, foreclosure or defalcation on any of the properties we had anything to do with."

The only historic anomalies in the area, owner built "out in the country" are the Brinkmeyer House, built on site from a plan book in 1898, on the corner of Park Avenue and West Gurley Street, and the Amy Hill House, a Victorian: Queen Anne, built in 1902 on the corner of Park Avenue and Coronado, by the widow of Sam'l. Hill. Mrs. Hill, with her three children occupied the home, as she continued the operation of the general store on South Montezuma, the warehouse built on a railroad siding to the Fairgrounds, (now Prescott College Art Gallery) and an automobile dealership, established by her late husband.

The firm of Aitken and Aven was also active during the late twenties and thirties in construction of numerous major buildings including Sacred Heart School and the Apache Lodge. Aven dealt with the state highway department to designate land for the Veterans Memorial Park on East Gurley Street, designing and building of native sandstone (flagstone) the Trilon honoring all veterans of all United States wars.

In his later years, Aven was rated highly as a general contractor and appraiser. He was the first to promote the idea of a building code, and introduced the concept of zoning to the council. Aven organized the Prescott Real Estate Board, the Home Builders Association, and was involved in organizing both the Junior Chamber of Commerce and the Prescott Chamber of Commerce.

With the installation of the first electrical system in Prescott in 1921, the growing reputation of Prescott nationwide as a haven for health seekers, and the entrepreneurial spirit of the young people of the town, a local foundry designed and built street lights for the downtown and soon the Aitken and Aven firm installed the lampposts in their subdivisions on the west side. Great care was exercised by Aven, as his early studies in architecture stood him in good stead in the platting of the lots protecting the natural terrain of granite outcroppings and many ancient oak and pine trees.

The area of West Prescott has retained a high level of integrity, and through the city historic preservation office, has joined earlier Prescott listings in The National Register of Historic Places, produced by Yavapai Heritage Foundation. The adjoining Pine Crest subdivision to the northwest of Country Club Drive, is not only a National Register listed district, but also a City of Prescott Historic District, a designation initiated by the property owners as a measure for protection of real estate values.