Bio - Builder
• Ruth Mohler

Building On Her Reputation

From Home-Maker to Home-Builder: A Brief History of Ruth McClintock Mohler

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A well-tailored, slender dark-haired woman in a no-nonsense business suit gets out of the drivers seat of her car and walks in to a Topeka bank, where she is escorted to the office of the vice-president. Standard greetings. Now its down to business. She unrolls a set of land plats on the desk, then some financial projections. The banker notes that she has short, softly bobbed hair and bright, intelligent gray eyes. She outlines her plans in a low-key, no nonsense manner, then sits back, her hands folded over her purse. The banker drums his fingers on the desk, clearly discomfited. He fidgets a while as he looks over the financials once again, then sits down heavily in his chair and leans forward.

"Well, we don't usually lend money to gamblers," he says, "but we'll take a chance on you." They both smile, his more nervous than hers. They shake hands. "Come back Tuesday," he says. "You can sign the papers then." She demurs. Time, she suggests, is of the essence, and she would like to have the paperwork done that very day. He finally agrees. As she leaves, he stands, scratches his head, and slowly shakes it from side to side, uncertain why he allowed this to happen.

This sounds like the kind of negotiation which, in one form or another, might take place in Topeka any day.

The encounter took place in 1925. The idea of loaning money to a woman is a novel one, and to do so for a speculative business venture decidedly more so, even in the Roaring Twenties. Who is this lady? Any woman who in 1926 could borrow thousands from a banker for a real-estate speculation must have been a very special person indeed.

When she went to the bank that day, Ruth McClintock Mohler was convinced that she knew what she was doing, and her husband, Jake, who was the Secretary of Agriculture for the State of Kansas, didn't doubt it. With two sons in a college and a10 year old daughter at home, Ruth had already decided she needed a new challenge. This will sound very familiar to us today, when, more often than not, wives and daughters have careers before, after, and during their child-raising years. But in 1926, Ruth was a pioneer. Jake was supportive. His daughter's memory is of how proud he was of his wife. Perhaps he realized he had little choice. Jake had been married to Ruth for 24 years, and he knew by now that she was a woman with a will of her own.

Ruth may well have been the first woman in Topeka to drive an automobile. She was the oldest of the four daughters of Dr John McClintock, a Topeka surgeon who was very skilled at his profession, and got very rich practicing it. Ruth and her sisters were indulged but also expected to excel. Family history records that in their teens, and with a Great

Smith automobile at their service, the girls would race to fires when the fire bell sounded, often passing the fire department's horse drawn equipment on the way. Finally, the fire chief sent Dr McClintock an angry letter, saying, "Dr McClintock, you are going to have to do something about your daughters; they are going too fast! I'm supposed to get to the fire first."

Ruth owned her own cars from an early age, and she did all the family driving. In fact, Jake never learned to drive, and apparently was quite content to ride along with Ruth. Riding along with Ruth proved to be a wise decision.

Ruth McClintock was born March 26,1881. She lived in Topeka all her life, and was schooled at the College of the Sisters of Bethany, an Episcopal girl's school housed at what is now Bethany Place, behind Grace Cathedral. In those days, it included classes from Kindergarten through two years of college, an amount of education then felt to be sufficient for women, and mighty few of them had more than that in turn-of-the-century Kansas. Shortly after her graduation, at age 20, she married Jake Mohler, whose father, Martin Mohler, was also the Kansas Secretary of Agriculture. In those days, it seems, the ticket to a government sinecure was to be a member in good standing of the Republican Party, and to be ready to go when Dad retired.

Ruth and Jake had some advantages not every young person then or since could claim. Dr McClintock was a generous man, and it was his particular foible to treat his family to extensive travels. Ruth and her two small sons accompanied the McClintocks and Ruth's sisters on a 3 month tour of Europe in 1909, with Jake coming over for about a month of it. So her education did not necessarily end at Bethany Place. During this particular trip, Dr McClintock spent most of his time "taking the 'kur'" at a Spa in Karlsbad, so it fell to Ruth and her mother to lead the other daughters and a female cousin around France, Italy and Switzerland without a male escort most of the time. You didn't do that in 1909 if you were faint of heart.

It is clear that by the 1920's Ruth had a settled family and was looking for a new challenge. The family tradition has it that after the affluence of her childhood, the rather penurious salary the State of Kansas saw fit to bestow on Jake was not to her liking. Whether this was her primary motivation is somewhat doubtful, because by the time she made her trip to the bank, her career as a realtor and building contractor seems to have been anything but carefully planned.

Dr McClintock is said at one time to have owned all the land which is now Topeka's Central Park, and it is also family tradition that he donated the land for the park to the City. Whether true or not, it is certain that he gave two lots on the south side of this land to Ruth and Jake, as well as at least one other to Ruth's sister, Helen. The story of how these formed the basis of her later business is recounted in a newspaper report by Sara Wallace of Larned, Kansas, writing in the Kansas City Star, January 21, 1927 [the alert members of the audience will note that this is exactly 71 years ago today]. As an aside, Sara Wallace might today be described as an early feminist; she was her husband's

publishing partner in a populist journal of the time called *Tiller and Toiler*. Her article on Ruth Mohler was the first of a series she did on what are described as "prominent women in all parts of the state."

The following paragraphs are taken directly from Sara Wallace's article, and are all in her quote marks; Ruth Mohler is speaking:

"There is probably not a woman in the world who has not longed to try her abilities in some money making way and enjoy business activity outside her home. I had always wanted to do so, but I had small children and there was plenty to do to care for them. As they grew older, the usual business ventures in which women engage, such as a tearoom, millinery or gift shop, did not appeal to me."

"However, those two lots which I owned were in a choice location and had big shade trees. They had been given to me by my father, and Mr Mohler and I had intended some time to build a home on them; but the money for building never seemed to be available and finally I grew tired of paying taxes on the lots and sold them. After I had bought a few things which I had long wanted—as any woman would do with a few unexpected thousands on her hands—I bought three other lots on the edge of Topeka, the town on one side and county on the other. In a short time these sold at a profit and my capital of only a few thousand went into a house which I built on a site owned by my sister. [This was her youngest sister, Helen] This was my first house, a Dutch colonial....My sister made money on her lot when it was sold. My profit on the house was negligible, but it was my beginning."

Ruth was a fast study. She realized quickly that she could continue to do land and building deals and that there was money to be made both ways. She soon hired a building foreman, a Mr Easter, who is described by Ruth's daughter, Marcia Mohler Thomson, as being "not very smart, but strictly honest." (Other family members are of the opinion that he was quite smart indeed: he was a skilled builder, and also knew that Ruth was a redoubtable partner). That was fine with Ruth, as she intended to be the brains of the business. Several of her earlier houses were designed by architect W. E. Glover, according to an article in the Topeka State Journal of August 11, 1926, and she apparently used Clyde Smalley as her construction superintendent at that time. According to her daughter, she also began to work with a young architect, Ted Greist, who drew up the plans from her designs for most of the remaining houses she built in her career. Without advertising, she began to build homes for friends, either on their lots, or by providing both land and construction. As these ventures were uniformly profitable, she began to think bigger.

Her trip to the bank followed, and she immediately bought the Sells Estate, a four-block square plot of land consisting of 130 lots, including what is now Randolph School. In the Wallace article, Ruth is quoted as saying,

"Within a week I had sold thirty of those lots to the school board for $10,000. Sixty more sold quickly. Only three of these have not yet been built on, so I feel my judgment was vindicated. The houses were good ones, too—the cheapest of all cost $7,000 and the most expensive $12,500. I managed to pay back my notes at the bank long before they were due and so saved my interest." Randolph school was built on the lots sold to the school board.

In these cynical times we might well be inclined to ask, "What did she know, and when did she know it." It seems almost unbelievable luck that she could have sold thirty lots to the school board that quickly without some inside information. It is known that W.A. Neiswanger, who founded the real estate firm, was a close friend and distant relation of Ruth's. It is also known that the Mohler's were very close to a local character and newsman named "Dutch" Schultz. I believe she had inside information from either these or similar sources to help focus her attention on the Sells property. Still, the banker may have been right. Even her own daughter says, "Mother was a gambler: she would have bet either way on whether the moon would come up tomorrow." Her personality was decisive. She was an excellent bridge player: in fact, she didn't enjoy the game unless she could play for money, and it was a daunting experience to be her opponent, according to her daughter-in-law, herself a bridge master.

Even before Sells Tract development was finished, Ruth, now in her element, was scouting out other potential purchases. She treated herself to a crash course in real estate law and techniques, particularly how to option land. She also had to learn how to get gas service and city water to her sites, and to get a feel for which direction development would take. Ruth by now had confidence in her judgment, and invested thousands of dollars in gas and water installations to optioned sites. She favored slopes and hills with trees, believing that these would be the most attractive to prospective buyers. In the summer of 1926, construction began on a new house for herself and her family on Granthurst. It was the first house in what became the Country Club addition, aside from an old farmhouse behind and near Topeka Avenue. She favored what she called "English Country Cottage" style houses, no doubt influenced by her travels in England before the Great War, and many of her more expensive homes were of this type. The house cost $20,000, a sizeable amount for the time, and was paid for with the cash she had earned. She now decided to market her business more actively, and so advertised a public open house to see it. Twenty-five hundred Topekans trouped through in a single Sunday afternoon. Among her early customers for a house on the Sells tract were Mr and Mrs Ned Fleming, for whom she built a house on Duane Street, just south of Huntoon. I believe this is now Medford Street. Newspaper descriptions of it at the time state: "It is a large colonial type with the exterior being entirely of creo-dipt shingles, the side walls of Dixie white and the roof covered with shingles in variegated grays and blues."

But Ruth had one problem as a builder, which she herself described by admitting, "I have been fully as much interested in the houses myself as I have in establishing a business." She wanted each house to set a standard for the neighborhood, so that: "Every one of my houses has cost more money than it should because I could not bear to finish it without

some of the niceties which I like for my own home. But of course I realize I must stop that if I want to make lots of money." I think that throughout her career Ruth saw her activities with avocational eyes. No matter how successful she became, she didn't see this as a "real business" with an separate office and staff, and with unlimited growth potential. It was her hobby more than it was a means of sustenance.

Ruth is said to have loathed the details of business, such as bookkeeping and taxes, which she hired out to others. And as we have seen, she had her own construction foreman and architect. Her modus operandi was to select and buy lots, arrange for utilities, site the buildings, order the plans from the architect, and pay the bills, leaving the construction and subcontractor hiring to the foreman. She went to the sites on an almost daily basis, and is described as climbing about on stairs and ladders, "Watching every detail of the work. If the bricks in the fireplace are improperly laid or a new arrangement of windows is made necessary by a piece of furniture a prospective buyer has displayed, it is the energetic [Mrs Mohler] who sees that the fireplace is reconstructed or the windows properly placed."

It is doubtful that she could have been on site quite as much as the Wallace article implies, however. Her oldest son, John Mohler, had for many years suffered from asthma and severe hay fever in the late summer, no doubt due to ragweed pollen, and was severely incapacited by it, so much so that the family routinely moved to Cascade, Colorado from early August until frost, sometimes not returning until November. So many Topekans took this path to escape heat and hay fever that even to this day there is an exit on the Interstate at Cascade marked "Topeka Boulevard." John Mohler was an excellent student, and was allowed to start classes late by the Washburn administration, where he was enrolled in law school by the time Ruth's business was well-established. Perhaps the pressure of paying for college for both John and Jim, as well as the tuition at Bethany for young Marcia were additional incentives for Ruth.

Soon two of her sisters, Gertrude Whitcomb and Helen McClintock, asked her to build houses for them. These were built side by side just around the corner from Ruth's own home, on Terrace Avenue. The Whitcomb house came first, in 1929, then Helen's which was completed in 1932. Ruth's nephew, John Whitcomb, while home that summer from West Point, was hired to help dig the foundation. These homes are small but uniquely designed, in a sort of Italianate style. They were occupied by the two sisters until their deaths in the 1970's. Jeannie Tucker, a good friend of my wife, occupies Aunt Gertrude's house to this day, and is only the second owner. In fact, by this time Ruth had purchased Quinton Heights hill and most of the surrounding slopes for her Country Club addition.

Perhaps the most rewarding and productive years of Ruth's life were the late 1920's. She was successful and well-known. Formal and informal parties were frequent in the Granthurst house, mostly attended by men who were, as one of her nieces puts it, artistic and full of interesting conversation. Ruth preferred being around men. I think this was because, as a businesswoman, she had more in common with them. "It was," says Valerie Whitcomb Valaas, "like being at a party at the Great Gatsby mansion." Among the attendees were architects, but also well-known newspaper writers of the day, such as

W.G. Clugstrom, the statehouse reporter for the Kansas City Star, and the aforementioned Topeka newsman, "Dutch" Schultz, who, with his large nose and ever-present cigar, must have looked a lot like W.C. Fields. Jake Mohler was there, too, but as relatives relate, didn't take much part in the avant garde discussions. He was already going deaf by then, and it is remembered that he simply turned off his hearing aid, sat in the corner, and smiled. It is also recalled that liquor flowed freely at these gatherings, in spite of the Volstead Act, and may have been an important reason for the popularity of Ruth's *salons.*

Robert James, the great grandson of Ruth Mohler, and his wife Carla bought their first house two years after their marriage. It was a colonial house facing Central Park on the south side. The first time Dot Mohler, Marcia Ransom's mother, heard this, she exclaimed, "That house was built by Ruth Mohler!" And so it was, as the abstract showed. It was next door to the small Dutch colonial, Ruth's first house. Another descendent of Ruth was now living in one of her homes, to which they were attracted by its style and quality, with no knowledge of who the builder had been.

Contemporary published information about Ruth's business activities during the decade of the 1930's, if available, has not come to my attention. Family information is that she continued her activities in spite of the Depression, so much so that family members complained that she was overdoing it. It is known that she was the contractor who built two of the still-existing fraternity houses at Washburn University, the Kappa Sigma and Phi Delt houses. These buildings were started around 1928 and finished in 1929 or 1930. They are among the few campus structures which survived the great tornado of 1966. Pictures are included in the accompanying addendum, and show that they are in the English style which she preferred.

Part of her business during the 1930's consisted of remodelling the large home of Dr McClintock at 1313 Fillmore into several apartments for rental. Gertrude Whitcomb and Helen McClintock lived there for awhile after the doctor's death in 1928, but probably needed the income the house could produce. Ruth's youngest son Jim and his wife moved in as managers of the property about 1936, living there for a year while Jim was working for the telephone company, and shortly after their daughter Marcia was born. This property continues to be apartments to this day, and is known as McClintock Place in honor of its original builder and owner. Also at this time, she extensively remodelled her home on Granthurst, building an underground garage below the original garage, and turning the upper portion into a library and office, from which henceforth she conducted her business.

It is said that Ruth lost a sizable amount of money in the crash of 1929; this is believed to be an inheritance she received from her father, which apparently was invested in some western utilities which failed. But both before and after the Crash, Ruth maintained control of the family finances. She continued to purchase stocks and study the market. Her daughter-in-law Dot Mohler even today owns some shares that Ruth first selected and purchased. Perhaps it was her losses in the Crash that propelled her to continue her business, but I doubt it. Family members agree that she loved what she was doing. When

her son Jim and his family returned for visits, they were always taken on a tour around town to visit home sites, and recall that Ruth spent most of the day with her builders and architect, not playing with her grandchildren. This was a different kind of Grandma! When her youngest child, Marcia, married Jay Thomson in 1938, Ruth built them a home as a wedding gift, which was down the hill from her home on Granthurst and on the east side of Topeka Boulevard. This house was sold soon afterward when at the start of WWII Jay joined the navy and the Thomsons moved to California.

By 1941 Ruth was 60 years old. Her family was dispersed and the building industry was grinding to a halt as the war effort consumed the nation's total resources. Building supplies were no longer available, the carpenters and plumbers were off to the war, and so it was time to slow down. Jake Mohler continued to be the Secretary of Agriculture, so no doubt the family was considerably better off than many contemporaries, even with her business activities shut down. But it was not Ruth's nature to slow down. As the war caused shortages of everything, she perceived that women's clothing was very hard to come by. Materials for tailored items was not available, except for yarn and a certain kind of narrow ribbon. Ruth learned to make a type of dress out of the ribbon which was much in demand, and started selling it from her house, giving classes in how to do it, and even sold custom-made garments. She is said to have been very successful at this venture as well.

After the war, Ruth did not attempt to restart her building business, in spite of a huge demand for housing as the post-war economic boom began. We know she was very particular about quality construction, and was critical of the shoddy little boxes that sprang up every place to meet the pent-up demand. But Ruth Mohler had many friends and she had a reputation. People began to come to her and ask her to build homes for them. Even at age 65 she couldn't resist the temptation. Once again she called up a team of craftsmen and set them to work. We don't have a clear idea of how many houses she was involved in thereafter. One of her last houses was for Trudy Workman on Yorkshire in Prospect Hills. A picture is enclosed. The round window was not part of the original design, and was added later during a project to enlarge the structure. There is also pictured a white Colonial on Danbury Lane that is believed to have been hers.

Jake died in 1953 shortly after retiring as Secretary of Agriculture. Ruth continued to live in the Granthurst house until her own death following a stroke on February 14, 1956, Valentine's day. Her heritage lives after her in homes all over the city of Topeka, most of which are still standing and still occupied. Topeka owes a debt of gratitude to this enterprising lady whose life was so full and whose vision was so often correct.

References:

1. Topeka State Journal, August 11, 1926, p. 17
2. Kansas City Star, January 21, 1927, p. 6D