Mabel Welch: El Paso’s First Female Architect

By Elizabeth Torres, Javier Medina and Ruth Vise

A wife and mother in her 20s. A widow and the sole owner of a construction business at 35. A University student at 46. A registered architect at 49.

In today’s American culture, women are encouraged to follow their dreams regardless of age. But for a woman who moved from Mississippi to Texas in 1906 in a covered wagon to marry late, have her first child at almost 30, run a successful business and go to a university in her 40s in the early part of the 20th century was most unusual. Mabel Clair Vanderburg Welch never blinked an eye. As she once said, “Things had to be done, and I managed to get them done.”

Mabel Welch accompanied her husband from DeKalb, Texas, to El Paso in 1916, looking for a cure for his tuberculosis. Born near Longtown, Mississippi, she would not only embrace her new home but become the first woman architect in El Paso and only the second registered one in Texas.

Following graduation from high school, Mabel Vanderburg served apprenticeships in both millinery and interior decoration, traditional female pursuits in her day. These two artistic endeavors would serve her well both in helping her husband with his building company and later when she herself began building homes.

After courting for five years, Malcolm and Mabel married in 1915. During an Army physical, Malcolm was told he had TB, and a doctor recommended that he come to dry West Texas. Malcolm took three years to convalesce, and although he had been a successful merchant in DeKalb, he began building homes in El Paso, an occupation that would keep him outside in the soothing dry air he and Mabel had come to love. Having built houses on a farm he owned, Malcolm began financing homes for El Paso residents and by 1920 began building homes in earnest.

From the beginning, Mabel was an active part of Welch Construction Company. She did all the drawings for the houses her husband built, as well as the interior decorating. He built houses on Trowbridge Drive, Pershing Drive, Tularosa Avenue, Hastings Drive, all over Central El Paso – and in the Lower Valley, all of dark brick with white trim and black lines around screen doors. The couple would move into a newly built house until it was sold. In a 1960 interview Mabel said, “For five years we did not occupy the same house over two months at a time. My husband built them and I furnished them.”

Three years after their arrival in El Paso, their only child, Elvin Carl, was born in December 1919. Even though Mabel Welch called herself “old fashioned” for believing that “women who have a good economic position should not work,” she herself was not only a wife and mother but a draftsman and decorator and part owner of a successful company in the 1920s.

In 1924, Malcolm’s TB became active again and Mabel had to finish a house under construction. While her husband was in the hospital, Mabel built the home she lived in most of her life at 3131 Wheeling Ave. The house was designed as a duplex, with her tubercular husband living in quarantine in the east side which opened to a porch where he could talk with his building crews. As an adult, his son Elvin recalled the only way he and his dad could communicate while the latter was quarantined was to wave to each other from their respective sides of this uniquely designed house.

In a typed autobiography her son recently presented to the El Paso County Historical Society, Mabel Welch noted that at first, the men who worked for her husband refused to work for a woman. So she replaced them and had “no more trouble.” She proceeded to build nine homes in the 3100 block of Wheeling Avenue and a total of 15 on the street in order to be close to her son and husband. During this time, Malcolm advised his wife on financial matters, building techniques and methods of dealing with building crews, and she learned every part of the business. In 1927, Malcolm died, and Mabel became the sole owner of the construction business, drawing all the plans, supervising the building, and even keeping the books.

At the time of Malcolm’s death, the Welches had a home under construction which had to be completed or Mabel would have lost the $10,000 bond. She needed money to complete construction and also to build other houses nearby, so she went to Sam Young, then president of El Paso National Bank, who lent her the money immediately, despite the fact that widows were poor financial risks in her day. In her autobiography, Mabel said that Young lent her money because he “had never seen me dancing or partying in Juárez.”

Mabel had begun building Spanish style homes before her husband’s death. Having discovered Spanish architecture in California while on a vacation, she thought the style complemented El Paso’s culture more than the Eastern red brick bungalow style that was then popular. She showed Malcolm one of her early Spanish houses on 2915 Wheeling Ave. on the way to the hospital for the last time before he died. “It’s very beautiful,” he said.

Her second such design was at 2731 Wheeling Ave. and then three elaborate two-story houses followed in Castle Heights below Manhattan Heights. From then on, Mabel Welch would be known for her Spanish-Mediterranean designs – with wrought iron decoration, red tile roofs, arches, balconies and courtyards.

While many builders went out of business during the Depression, Welch did not. She sold her medium-priced houses as quickly as they were built. In 1934, the Women’s Division of the Chamber of Commerce began an architectural program in El Paso to support the use of Spanish design. Welch herself wrote, “A city with our historical background and geographical location should have an architectural flavor appropriate to, and typical of, our surrounding culture.” In 1935, the city presented her with an official commendation for changing the predominant style of architecture in El Paso from American bungalow to Mediterranean.