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# Modern Family

Over the river and through the woods to our *children's* and *grandchildren's* house we go, as "trailing parents"... While we reinvent ourselves, join museum boards, and participate in the culture of an exciting new city like Portland. BY COLIN W. SARGENT

A perfectly innocent husband watches a National Football League game on his tastefully understated 72-inch flat screen. Patriots vs. Jets. Ten points down with two minutes to go, Brady takes the snap, looks down field, and fires an end-zone spiral toward... a pickoff!

"Honey, could you empty the dishwasher now so I can start dinner before I run out to my emergency session with 1) opposing counsel 2) the other thoracic surgeons in my department 3) my fellow Nobel laureates?"

From the depths of their man caves, the Troglodytes grumble, "who was the traitorous goody-goody who first broke



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*"Cooking is like love. It should be entered into with abandon or not at all."  
 -Harriet van Horne*

## TRENDS



the magic spell and agreed to perform a fair share of the household duties with his spouse? And what was he thinking? 'If only we could get our hands on Helpful Husband Zero!'"

According to *Look* magazine, we've found him—in Portland's West End.

After *Look's* October 5, 1971, feature story on the groundbreaking new demographic departure architect Ted Oldham had begun by sharing chores with his wife, Sally, "I remember getting a call in the middle of the night from a man in Texas," Ted says. *A low drawl.* "He told me, 'You are a traitor to our sex to do this to us.'"

At the time, the Oldhams were living in the experimental suburb of Reston, Virginia—a new kind of community.'

Their secret sharing had actually begun "when Ted earned a Fulbright-Hays scholarship to study architecture in London," Sally says. "It was a great luxury to get to reassess what each of us would do."

**Ted is on the city's Historic Preservation Board and was just elected to the Maine Historical Society Board. I've served on Greater Portland Landmarks. We never dreamed we'd be this active here. —Sally Oldham**

This was in 1968. The couple had hit a rocky patch during the Summer of Love and filed for divorce but decided to try to stick it out and discover themselves again.

With her own historic preservation career taking off, Sally was gratified to see her husband, with his dark shock of long hair, helping out with the ironing at night as a measure of thanking her for uprooting her



life and coming to England with him.

"We'd been living in Berkeley, California, just before London, while Sally finished school," Ted says. "We went to bed at night to either the smell of grass or tear gas."

With the world turned upside down, why not try a little tenderness?

"Here's how they work it out," *Look* writer Sandie North marveled. "If Sally grocery shops, Ted cooks dinner. If Sally feeds Erin supper, Ted bathes her and puts her to bed. The Oldhams have no set schedule of chores. Each one feels responsible for doing half the housework and half the child care."

So "phenomenal" was this unprecedented behavior, *Look* reported that "Officials of the Labor Department's Women's Bureau are scurrying to document" it.

**F**ast-forward 41 years, exactly. In this post-feminist world, the Women's Bureau in the Labor Department is hardly a household word, though it still exists.

Ted, who earned his architecture degree

COURTESY TED OLDHAM



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The 50/50 marriage, pt. 2  
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at Penn, has recently retired from a distinguished career as a nationally respected architect in the Washington, D.C. area. His most recent projects, including some finished here at his studio in Maine, include waterfront palaces “for the Marriott heirs,” including “a place on Lake Winnepesaukee and one on Linekin Bay.” Before that, his preservation projects included everything from renovating the Mayflower Hotel’s West Wing to being principal designer for the Park Hyatt, Four Seasons, and Mayfair Regent hotels in Washington D.C. Then there’s the 200,000-square-foot headquarters for *U.S. News & World Report* (Boston properties), as well as master plans for King Abdul Aziz University in Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency offices in Langley, Virginia.

A former resident of McLean, Virginia (a bedroom community for the CIA), Ted quips, “At cocktail parties in McLean, no one can

ask each other what they’re doing at work.”

Far from being ‘frozen music,’ his designs have followed him here and continue to inspire new work, including an ambitious project he’s underwritten himself to photograph every house in the city of Portland. “I became fascinated with the 1924 street files in the assessing department, so often consulted by historic preservationists today, and I wanted to capture the way we live now” just as memorably, “for future architects and planners to use.” He pauses. “There are 20,000 buildings to shoot.”

There is art in this, as well as design. “The first time around, there were deep snowstorms” that change the way we view our sense of a vanished Portland today, especially as a moment stopped in time. “That’s why so many of the 1924 images have snow drifts halfway up the first-floor stairs.” Years from now, what temporal accidents will redefine what he’s snapping in 2012?

**A**fter serving as national vice president for programs and services at the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C., in the 1980s, Sally commanded even more influence at the top of a national network of preservationists in Washington, D.C., as president of Scenic America, Inc., “the national non-profit environmental organization whose mission is to

Our **other** daughter is a **Buddhist monk in France** who **told** us she was going to **remain** with the order the **rest** of her life. Since we weren’t going to be **able** to **live close** to her, it made the move to **Portland** easy.

–Sally Oldham

preserve and enhance the scenic character of America’s communities and countryside,” according to her CV.

Here in Portland, she’s “just finished two years as vice president and two as president of the board at Greater Portland Landmarks. Her active consulting projects include her service as “Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) Coordinator for Maine DOT’s Martin’s Point Replacement Project through the Federal Highway Administration.”

**B**y 2001, their daughter Erin, adorably depicted in the *Look* magazine photos, had grown up, earned a PhD in Psychological Studies in Education [her Oldham Innovative Research focuses on early education], and moved to Portland.

## A Cottage Industry

**JOHN HATCHER on property transfers related to the extended Oldham family:**

**25 SHERMAN STREET** Sold the house to Erin Oldham and Steve Digiovanni, then sold it for them when they moved to 55 Thomas (two transactions).

**55 THOMAS STREET** Sold the house to Erin Oldham and Steve Digiovanni, then sold it for them when Erin moved to Melrose St. (two transactions).

**387 DANFORTH #1** Sold the house to Ted and Sally Oldham and then sold it for them to the current owner (three transactions).

**25 VAUGHAN STREET** Ted and Sally Oldham's primary residence. Private sale between the Oldhams and unnamed party.

**41 MELROSE STREET** Sold the house to Erin Oldham and then to the current owners (three transactions).

**137 EMERY STREET** Sold the home to Steve Digiovanni (one transaction).

**117 NEAL STREET** Had property listed when Erin Oldham bought the home (one transaction).

**187 VAUGHAN STREET #1** (The Cushman House, first floor) I had the property listed when Elaine Digiovanni purchased it (two transactions).

"First she lived at 25 Sherman Street, in a very wonderful John Calvin Stevens home, a beautiful white wood-frame Victorian," says John Hatcher of Keller Williams Real Estate/The Hatcher Group.

She and her [now ex] husband, Dr. Steve Digiovanni, a pediatrician, were blessed with triplets.

And don't look now, but, in spite of having been singled out early in their lives as a defining new demographic slice, Ted and Sally became standard-bearers for still another trend: "Trailing Parents."

Sally says, "Erin's triplets were born at 26 weeks, so they were micro-preemies: 1 lb. 04 oz, 1 lb. 09 oz, 1 lb. 12 oz. I committed to spending one week a month up in Maine to help out."

As the triplets grew, the house got smaller for Erin, according to Hatcher.

"In 2007, Steve and Erin decided they either had to put \$100,000 into the house or move somewhere larger.

"They moved to 55 Thomas Street, a gorgeous John Calvin Stevens-designed brick house with a tower in the heart of the West End."

During this time, "Ted and Sally Oldham

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**TRENDS**

purchased half a duplex on 387 Danforth Street, the William Vaughan House (1799), after it had been converted to condos, to be close to the triplets.”

In 2010, “they purchased the flattop on the corner of Orchard and Vaughan. Dur-

**TRAILING PARENTS**

It’s a term coined by John Hatcher of Keller Williams, the Hatcher Group. “In the corporate world, we’d always have a trailing spouse,” Hatcher says. “It’s a person who has another job elsewhere, then usually the spouse—back in the old days it was the wife—would stay behind, sell the house, wait for the kids to finish school, then join her spouse at the new location. If no kids were involved, they’d still be wrapping up details.

“When it comes to this ‘Trailing Parents,’ it’s grandparents wanting to be closer to the grandchildren. It’s not over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s house we go... it’s to our children’s and grandchildren’s house we go.”

The trend has made a profound impact not just in Hatcher’s house sales, particularly in Portland’s West End, but in the cultural gifts that trailing parents, often extremely accomplished in their fields, bring to Portland and the coast of Maine.

“Another set of trailing parents is Corky and Carla Clark,” Hatcher says. “In 2009, they purchased 104 Neal Street from architect Sam Van Dam. Their daughter and son had fallen in love with Portland and moved here ahead of them, living in one of the Pine Street row houses designed by John Calvin Stevens. Corky and Carla have redone the kitchen—updating the 1980s kitchen they bought.”

As for why Portland’s trailing parents feel more rewarded than they might have at a different destination, Hatcher says, “Portland is so easy a community to get to know the neighbors. If you want to participate with them, it’s great. If they don’t, it’s

ing her research, Sally found from the original plans that the house was built in 1902, and by 1904 there had already been major renovation. People think that only happens today, so it’s interesting that even early in the 20th century, some houses would be reinterpreted just two years into an ownership.”

Good lord, another trend.

“Fast forward to 2012. Elaine Digiovanni, Stephen’s mother, has just bought into the Cushman House on 187 Vaughan to be clos-



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er to the grandchildren.”

“They just closed last week,” Sally says.

Sentimental readers will recognize Elaine’s new residence as the John Calvin Stevens-designed brick manse that was once home to the owners of the legendary Cushman Bakery.

great. In other cities, people ask about your portfolio or your bloodline before you can serve on a board. Here, people find it very easy to project themselves into a culture through boards, committees, and a lot of these people are finding themselves. The Clarks invited me to a housewarming party around Christmas. I thought, I have to go to make sure there’ll be enough people attending, because they’d just got here. I got there to find 75 people.”

- “Mary Doherty, 28 Carlton Street, followed her children here. They purchased her house from me. She was a docent at the Victoria Mansion and now she’s on the board of trustees.”
- “Dr. George Roth, a neurologist, and his wife, Shirley, followed his daughter and son-in-law from Pittsburgh to Maine. They ended up building a 7,000-square-foot house in Woolwich on the Sheepscot River.”

*Why so large?* “Neurologists have to have this calm demeanor, because they’re in surgery. He is the calmest man. She’s very elegant and delightful. When I started showing George houses ten years ago, he said, ‘John, [during my medical career] I haven’t spent four waking hours a day with my wife, whom I love so much. We’re going to have to build a big enough house for her to be able to get away from me!’”

The result: “They have a daylight type basement on a sloping lot to the water with ten-foot ceilings, because they took up ballroom dancing and built this big ballroom dance studio there.”

On the subject of cultural engagement: “Another buyer came to Portland; she played cello and violin. I sold her a house in Cumberland Foreside. Audrey found herself in three different chamber groups, doing performances. If you have a little bit of an outgoing personality, Portland is an easy city to break into.”

If you’re keeping score, that’s seven architecturally significant houses Hatcher has sold to the extended Oldham family in the West End.

“It’s great for business,” Hatcher says of trailing parents, “but it also brings these great people here,” an economic and cultural lift. ■

➤ For more, visit [portland-monthly.com/portmag/2012/09/parents-extras](http://portland-monthly.com/portmag/2012/09/parents-extras).



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