

## [HOW MY DAD SOLD A HOUSE TO THE RUSSIANS—IN 1955](#)

My husband's most beloved reading material is The Washington Post's National Weekly Edition. An article in the April 30-May 6, 2007 edition caught Barry's eye: "Father of Russian Democracy" by Lee Hockstader. The article commemorated Boris Yeltsin's life and described his rise to power in Russia. That was interesting and historical enough, but one paragraph grabbed my husband's attention.

The author noted that in 1965, Yeltsin became the director of a large factory that manufactured prefabricated houses. In any other household, that might have been a barely noted bit of trivia.

Not in our house: My parents, Andy & Clara Oddstad, owned Oddstad Homes, which was the largest residential home builder in Northern California in its heyday in the early to mid 1960s. It hit a peak as the 10th largest residential builder in the United States. The company dropped from the public eye when its assets were sold following my father's death in 1964.



Andy & Clara Oddstad, founders of Oddstad Homes, in the 1950s

The sentence in the Washington Post rung a bell, because my husband knew a bit of my family's lore.

### **Oddstad Homes sold a house to the Russians in 1955.**

People who have matured in the post-Cold War period do not GET what that means. 1955 was the height of the Cold War. *Everyone* thought of the Soviet Union as the Evil Empire. (Oh, yeah, maybe a few ultra-liberals thought that the USSR might not quite be the home of Satan, but very few people felt that way. Even my father, a liberal from a Scandinavian background, *hated* Russia and communism.)

What were the Russians doing, house shopping in the United States in 1955?

That's what I wanted to know. I just remember the overall rumblings of the event, being ten years old when it happened. The Washington Post article motivated me to call my aunt Elma, who was there when the action went down in 1955. She remembered the story very well.

How and why did the Russians buy a house from a developer in Northern California? Think "People to People." The Eisenhower administration instituted a People to People

program in which Russian trade representatives could come here to study our industries. The idea was to trade knowledge and build fellowship. (My aunt did not know if the United States sent trade emissaries to Russia in exchange . . .)

The Russian delegation came to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1955 as part of a nationwide survey of building techniques in residential housing. Oddstad Homes was one of the builders they visited.

“Well, what most developers across the country had shown them was a Parade of Model Homes,” my aunt Elma reported. “All finished, decorated and pretty. That isn’t what they wanted. They had real construction problems and wanted to know how to solve them.”

“Kosygin was the head of the Russian delegation,” my aunt reported. Kosygin. Name sounded familiar to me.

Googling the name left me breathless: *Alexey Kosygin*, Premier of the Soviet Union from 1964 to 1980? *That Kosygin*? Khrushchev’s buddy? Might have been.

After a rising career in the Communist Party, during which he headed various Committees with responsibility for consumer affairs, Alexey Kosygin became a full member of the Poliburo in 1948 and a minister for light industry until 1953. Following Stalin’s death in 1953, Kosygin was demoted. His star dipped a bit until his buddy Nikita K. spring boarded him back among the movers and shakers of the USSR. But that took a while.

It’s entirely possible that Alexey Kosygin was the Kosygin who found himself leading a trade delegation to look at housing production in the United States in 1955.

At any rate, they visited the Oddstad Homes tract of Rollingwood in the hills of Burlingame CA. That’s where the building was happening at the time. It wasn’t to be an ordinary visit. For one thing, my father was a working man, once a card-carrying member of the AFL-CIO Carpenters’ Union who worked his way through college as a carpenter. He had little patience for show and tell and finished products. He liked workers and action.



Andy Oddstad water skiing in the San Francisco Bay back when it wasn’t too polluted to set foot in. He was a wrestler, football player and frogman in WWII.

When the Russians hit Rollingwood, Andy Oddstad was ready. It was one of those inexplicable happenings where threads from all over come together and flower. Our

painting contractor, Boris Bogart, was from Russia. He spoke the language and was able to establish contact with the delegation in a deeper way than they'd known with other builders. He found out what they wanted—they had all our literature about home construction, but didn't know how to apply the techniques.

For instance, how did they hide the seams in the newly invented wonder product, sheetrock? (Which is also known as plaster board and wallboard and replaced the time consuming lathe and plaster as wall treatments.) They knew about sheetrock mud and tape, but how did you use them? They had written instructions and the tools and mud, but they couldn't figure out the technique. The Russians wanted to see how sheetrocking was done.

So Boris took them out to where the men were working and they got hands on instruction on taping sheetrock, something that would be revolutionary and life-enhancing to builders in Russia.

The way Oddstad homes installed hardwood floors was another huge innovation to the Russians. At that time, a man on his hands and knees usually laid hardwood floors by pounding one nail at a time. Oddstad Homes used the new pneumatic guns. A guy could walk along and shoot the nails into the floor, not even needing to bend down. (He did have to be careful where he put his feet.)

Everybody ended up out on the rough and ready jobs. My dad couldn't stay away from them. He was an engineer by education, but had started his career as a carpenter. Throughout his career, my father used his engineering skills for innovations in the construction of residential housing.

He had recently perfected prefabricated roof joists. You see the triangular forms all the time now, being hauled down the freeway on trucks, stuck up on rough-framed houses in a day or less. Pre-fab roof joists are the triangular wooden pieces that they put on top of walls to quickly and easily get a roof on a house. They have the advantage of being faster and easier to build (on the ground or in a factory, these days) and being safer for the workers. The guys don't have to get up on the roof and build each roof joist-by-joist, risking falling.

My dad had perfected them and Oddstad Homes used them routinely. The Russians were amazed by the innovation.



Andy Oddstad & Triff Trifeletti. Triff was my dad's "dirt man." He handled the grading, the roads, and all the heavy work of installing subdivisions. They were dear friends, as this informal water-skiing shot shows.

The Russians were enthralled, proclaiming Rollingwood the best housing value in the United States.

My dad had a different interpretation. He told me, "They liked my houses because the men were working when they visited the jobs. They wanted that—but *my men worked hard because I paid them decent wages!*" He never liked the Communist plan.

The excursion ended with Kosygin standing in a finished home, looking around in awe. "This is a home that a commissar would have in Russia!" he said. It was a typical Rollingwood house intended for a middle class family.

"How much would it be to ship this house to Russia?" Kosygin asked my father. My dad was speechless, but managed to make a "horseback estimate." My aunt told me the term came from "the old days when the surveyors used to ride around on horseback, estimating plots as they rode. It was very rough." My dad tossed a figure at Kosygin.

"I'll take it," Kosygin said.

No one was more surprised than my father.

The Russians left and the delegation went back to the USSR.

At Oddstad Homes, they thought that was the end of it.

But the news media had gotten a hold of the story—it was such a bizarre occurrence. The story ran nationwide on the AP & the UP. A reporter named Bob Considine was quite taken with the tale and wrote about it a few times, to national headlines.

In those days, shipping anything to the USSR required a permit and tons of paperwork. Amtorg was the Russian organization that issued permits. We heard nothing from them about the house.

Six months passed, and everyone at Oddstad Homes thought the deal was dead. Just a fluke from a mind-blowing day on the job.

But Bob Considine wrote one more article, asking, “Where is that house?” It ran nationwide.

Two days later, Amtorg coughed up the permits. The Russians didn’t want to lose face in the light of the publicity.

Oddstad Homes prefabricated the house in five enormous sections and packed it for shipping. They’d have to construct a foundation on the other end, and then put the house on it the way prefab houses are built today.

The story stirred feelings all over. The people who had bought homes in Rollingwood wanted to do something for their long distance neighbors. They sent housewarming gifts. Gifts from everyone in the subdivision were shipped with the house. The Rollingwood residents sent items that any new homeowner would want for his or her new house.

The flood of gifts and giving was unprecedented for the Cold War. (My aunt noted that someone took inventory of the gifts. Seventy five percent of them did not originate in the United States, even back then.)

What happened to the house?

No one knows. “We never heard anything about it.” my aunt Elma told me. “It’s a mystery.”

And a strange moment when human beings touched each other and exchanged ideas and skills—and a whole house.

I would love to know what happened to that house. And was that *the* Alexey Kosygin? Did he have to pay for a very large impulse buy made on a trip to the infamous West?

Did Yeltsin have anything to do with it?

Where is that house?

*Sandy Nathan*



The Oddstad family in 1955.

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