

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historical name Smith, Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Stein, House  
other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 5045 Ponvalley Road not for publication   
N/A  
city or town Bloomfield Township vicinity N/A  
state Michigan code MI county Oakland code 125  
zip code 48302

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination        request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets        does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant        nationally X statewide        locally. (        See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Robert B. Yerkert 2/20/97  
Signature of certifying official Date

MI SHPO  
State or Federal agency and bureau



=====  
6. Function or Use  
=====

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: Domestic Sub: single dwelling  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: Domestic Sub: single dwelling  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

=====  
7. Description  
=====

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Wrightian  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete  
roof Asphalt  
walls Brick  
Wood/weatherboard  
other N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

=====  
8. Statement of Significance  
=====

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Period of Significance 1949-50  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Dates N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)  
N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Architect/Builder Frank Lloyd Wright

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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9. Major Bibliographical References

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(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

- Previous documentation on file (NPS) None
- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Location of Additional Data

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

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10. Geographical Data

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Acreage of Property About 3 acres

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	17	313570	4714790	3	_____	_____
2	_____	_____	_____	4	_____	_____

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

=====  
11. Form Prepared By  
=====

name/title Frederick J. Bidigare, Architect  
organization Frederick J. Bidigare, Architect date Nov. 21, 1996  
street & number 821 Hawthorn telephone 810/399-9380  
city or town Royal Oak state MI zip code 48067

=====  
Additional Documentation  
=====

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.  
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage  
or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

=====  
Property Owner  
=====

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Mr. Robert Smith  
street & number 221 East Constance telephone 805/563-0098  
city or town Santa Barbara state CA zip code 93105

=====  
=====  
Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Smith Home

Description

The Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Smith Home is an unassuming one story home characterizing many of Frank Lloyd Wright's design characteristics. These characteristics include strong horizontal cantilever roof planes, ingenious building techniques, free flowing interior spaces exploding to the outdoors, as well as an "organic" relationship to the site. The home is basically "L" shaped in plan with its major living areas oriented to the south-southwest. The home is situated in such a manner as to provide privacy from the street while allowing the living areas to experience the openness and true beauty of the site. The home's low horizontal profile is unassuming from the street and appears to be part of the site. The carport with its dramatic roof cantilever along with the strong horizontal planes of the living room lower and upper sections are the first noticeable elements of the home. These two horizontal elements are anchored by the kitchen and chimney brick mass which provide a degree of verticality and contrast. The basic construction is made up of load bearing solid brick walls, sandwich walls made up of a 3/4" plywood core covered with cypress boards and reverse battens, plate glass and a radiant heat colored concrete floor. The interior space has flowing open living and dining areas with a private bedroom wing and small study on the east portion of the plan. The "work space" (kitchen) and fireplace brick mass anchor the entire plan.

The Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Smith Home is a prime example of Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian design philosophy for housing the "common" man. The home is a one story structure of approximately 1,800 square feet incorporating Wright's design principles by "organically" blending with the site and surroundings, the emphasis of strong horizontal roof planes and cantilevers to emphasize this relationship to site. The basic construction techniques and use of materials were to be of a simple and honest nature....not only to express Wright's organic approach to architecture but also to keep construction costs well within the means of the "ordinary" family. The home is situated on a three acre parcel in the middle of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. One approaches the home off of Ponvalley from the north. The home is nestled in a low rise that slopes from the north to the south. The home is barely visible from the road in this setting with only the strong horizontal roof planes, the living room clerestory, the central fireplace/workspace core, entry and carport showing. The entry from the road is very dramatic at night especially with the lit living room clerestory. Smith used to tell the story that when the house was first lit at night (circa 1949-50's) a woman was driving by in her car, saw the home and thought that it was a railroad train going through the area. Such was the impact of the dramatic lighting created by Wright in this home. Upon first approaching the home from the north, it appears to exude a sense of mystery and intimacy. After proceeding to the very simple and unassuming covered entry one then enters the home through a narrow passageway which explodes into the living area with a dramatic view to the south. The site was originally a meadow with a few maples and oaks scattered throughout. The southeast portion of the site was a marsh area which was fed from a small stream flowing through the site from the northwest corner to the southeast. In the late 1950's part of the low lying area was dredged out to create a small pond and fountain. This pond and all the landscaping including trees, shrubbery and planting was done by Smith under the direction of landscape architect Thomas Church.

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Thomas Church was visiting the home in the late 1950's and provided Smith with a preliminary working plan. Today the surrounding area has been developed with additional homes. The trees and shrubbery are mature and shield much of the surrounding development. The setting now creates a truly serene and beautiful experience. One can appreciate the changing of the seasons, the changes of time in the day and the coming and going of wildlife (the pond is a refuge for Canadian geese, gray herons, ducks and other such migratory fowl). This large beautiful site with this small organic masterpiece nestled in it make this home one of the truly outstanding examples of Wright's work.

The basic layout of the home appears to be very simple in its "L" shaped plan. The interior spaces, again a typical Wright design trait, flow from one to another. This is especially true of the large living area, dining area, work space (kitchen) and garden room. The anchor for the plan of the house is the large fireplace brick mass and work space area. The bedrooms and bathrooms are located on the eastern wing of the house which affords necessary privacy. The plan of home is rotated 30 degrees off a north-south axis -- a practice typically done by Wright for homes in this northerly latitude. By rotating the plan this way it allows for sunlight to reach every space in the home at some part of the day. This home is also a prime example of how Wright used site orientation to capture the sun's warmth in the winter while providing shade in the summer. The use of the venting clerestory windows on the north side and the "French type" doors and casement windows on the south and east help to provide natural ventilation for the summer months.

The materials used in the home are confined to brick, tidewater cypress, concrete, glass and roofing. The brick is of a reddish hue with flush vertical joints and deeply raked horizontal joints (again to emphasize the horizontal). It is used in the core areas such as the fireplace, work area and small study to provide a sense of mass and anchorage around which the open interior spaces flow. These brick masses are of solid masonry construction indicating the true integrity of the material.

The cypress wall system provides the necessary partitions for areas requiring privacy and protection against the outside elements. This wood wall system is made up of a 3/4" plywood core with the horizontal tidewater cypress boards and battens fastened to the plywood with brass screws. Wright designed this wall system as an economical and flexible alternative to plaster and wood stud construction. The ceilings throughout the home are of solid tidewater cypress boards. The cypress is an outstanding weathering wood much like teak. The wood is currently on the endangered species list and is very difficult if not impossible to find. The richness of the wood's texture and honey color provide a warmth through the entire home, much like that of a wood boat. All the brass screws in the walls are turned horizontal to again emphasize the horizontal.

The fixed glass walls, French doors and casement sash are of 1/4" plate glass. Wright used glass to allow exterior spaces to flow into the interior. His use of the mitered glass corner in this house provides a continuous contact with the outside. The floor through the entire home is of colored concrete scored in a 2' x 4' grid. This grid is the basis and unifying element for the entire home. The concrete is colored with carborundum, a floor hardener, and has a rich texture and color that resembles leather. Again it was Wright's

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idea to take a basic material and let its full natural and organic qualities come out.

Imbedded in the concrete floor is a radiant hot water heating system. Wright employed this heating technique in many of his homes. It was a concept of heating that he learned about while building the Imperial Hotel in Japan. Upon entering the Smith Home most of the guests remove their shoes. By doing so the floor is kept clean and polished by people walking around in their socks. The warmth of the floor in the winter is indeed a treat. Many of the visitors to the home are from Japan. The home has always been a favorite of the Japanese who make it part of their yearly tour to the United States to see the works of Frank Lloyd Wright. The idea of removing one's shoes is part of the Japanese culture. Again what should be emphasized in the Smith Home is the use of natural and basic building materials in such a way as to convey their innate characteristics, the basis for Wright's concept of organic architecture. The roof has never leaked. This is indeed remarkable for a Wright home with a flat roof. The original roof which lasted almost 50 years was replaced in November 1995. The new roof was constructed in the same way as the original (that of a 4 ply coal tar built up roof). All the copper flashing has been replaced and certain areas over the brick rowlock wall caps have been capped with an inconspicuous copper cap. The new roof should last for 50 to 75 years given proper maintenance. The reason that the new roof is stressed is that it is the most important element in the home protecting it from the elements. The original as designed by Wright was properly installed and maintained. The new roof should have the same lasting characteristics.

Wright's masterly use of space is exemplified in this home in plan and section. One enters into the home through a low (6'-7" high) unassuming entry into the northeast corner of the low portion of the living area. The eye is led into the space with the long built-in sitting area, the horizontal shelving above the seating, the strong linear cypress wall and ceiling system. The eye is then immediately drawn to the southwest mitered glass corner of the living area and on to the outside landscape. The space then jumps to 8'-9" at the south portion of the living area exploding to the outside. By entering at the diagonal of this space, the length of the room is exaggerated and made more dramatic. The space then flows around the fireplace core into the dining area and the rest of the home. The corridors leading to the bedrooms and baths are again at 6'-7" and jump up to 8'-9" in the bedrooms and baths. A very special room is the Study. Although the room is only 7'-8" x 7'-8" (8' x 8' module) it is truly a delight. The walls are of brick with no contact with the outside except through an upper clerestory and large skylight. This space is the shelter, the womb, the place to contemplate and meditate. The "Work Space" kitchen is compact and functions much like a ship's galley. Even with its limited counter and cupboard space it is extremely functional and a delight to be in with its high clerestory and skylight. All the appliances are built in and all unnecessary clutter is eliminated.

The natural and artificial lighting through the home again exemplify Wright's genius. As was stated before, by siting the structure at a 30 degree angle off of the north-south axis natural sunlight can penetrate every area of the home at some time of the day. The large amount of glass, especially to the south, allows for a profusion of sunlight to penetrate the spaces. One can read a book in the dead of winter at midnight with just the moonlight reflecting off the snow and bouncing into the interior. Wright incorporated many of his concepts of artificial lighting into the Smith house. Indirect cove, recessed, patterned and hanging fixture

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lighting are used throughout the home. None of the light sources are left alone. They are all integrated into the architecture. The home is especially pleasing at night when the spaces take on a festive atmosphere. At night from the exterior, the lights reflect off the large glass walls and mitered glass corners and give the home a crystalline quality.

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Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Smith Home

Significance

The Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Smith Home was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1946 and constructed in 1949. The home was modified in 1968 with the incorporation of the South Terrace and a new Garden Room. This modification was done through the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation in Spring Green, Wisconsin under the direction of William Wesley Peters, chief architect. The home is a prime example of Mr. Wright's "Usonian" design philosophy.

Melvyn Maxwell Smith first became familiar with Frank Lloyd Wright while taking an art and architecture survey course at Wayne State University in 1939. He was so taken with the work of Wright that he vowed that some day he would own a Frank Lloyd Wright home. Mr. Smith ("Smithy") and Sara were married in the spring of 1940. They took a trip in the summer of 1941 to Wisconsin at which time they met Mr. Wright for the first time. It was at this first meeting that Smith asked Mr. Wright if he could build a home for \$5,000.00. Wright indicated that it might be a little more but that Smith first of all need a site... "a site that nobody else wanted... a site with some drop to it" (Frank Lloyd Wright Remembered, p. 90) Meanwhile World War II intervened and Smithy went into the service.

As soon as he got out of the service, the Smiths went searching for a site until they ended up with this beautiful parcel of approximately 3 acres in Bloomfield Township. The site and the surrounding area were undeveloped at that time...again a site that no one wanted. Over the years the trees and landscaping have matured. The area has developed but the serenity and beauty of the site remain for Mr. Wright's "little gem" (Detroit Free Press, May 23, 1951).

After the Smiths had acquired their site in 1946, Smithy wired Mr. Wright that "I have found the land, and I have the 'Wright' land, and all that we need is the 'Wright' architect." Mr. Wright wired Smithy back to "Come right away." (Frank Lloyd Wright Remembered, p. 91). It was over Labor Day weekend and Smithy had little time because of school starting. He got on a plane and took the topographical survey with him to Spring Green. That Monday he met with Mr. Wright, went over the topographical map and reviewed the modest requirements for the home. He asked Mr. Wright when he would receive the plans. Mr. Wright replied "When the spirit moves me". Wright did not have Smiths' address for mailing and since there were so many Smiths in the phone book he sent the plans to the Gregor Affleck residence in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. (Wright had designed a home for the Afflecks in 1940). The Afflecks notified the Smiths that their plans were with them. Smithy immediately got the plans and after some review informed Sara that "...you and I can't build this home. We do not have the money for it." Smithy went back to Mr. Wright and said "Mr. Wright, I cannot afford to build this house. I do not have the money." Mr. Wright replied "Smith you can build this house. You go home and you study these plans and know these plans so that you can hire people who are interested in Frank Lloyd Wright architecture. You will be able to find people to work very reasonably. You can contract the house yourself...you can build that house" (Frank Lloyd Wright

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Remembered, p.93). Smith gained the confidence from Mr. Wright after this meeting and reviewed the plans between the end of 1946 and the beginning of 1949. Smithy and Sara then went back to Taliesen and met with Mr. Wright informing him that they were ready to proceed. Smithy had suggested a few changes (i.e. the change in the overhang in the Living area from 2' to 4') to which Mr. Wright agreed. During this meeting Mr. Wright turned to Sara and said to her "Your husband would make a fine architect." This comment by Mr. Wright to Smithy was cherished by Smithy until he died and is cherished by Sara to this day. It showed Mr. Wright's sincere acknowledgment of enthusiasm, dedication and talent....what better Client. Smithy and Larry Kunin ( a friend from Smith's boy scout days) began organizing supplies and tradesmen for the home. Peter Turczyn and Steve Kovass worked for \$2.00 /hr. Relatives and friends would come after their ordinary jobs and work until 12:00 or 1:00 am in the morning. George Woods did all the cabinetry and furniture for minimum wages. Those who worked on the home were all dedicated. The creation of Mr. Wright's design was not an abstraction. It was put together with the highest level of care and craftsmanship by dedicated people. The results are evident today.

Smithy oversaw and documented everything...from the laying of the "dry well footing" to the final roofing. Many young architects at the time watched the home go up. They were impressed by Mr. Wright's genius and the Smiths' enthusiasm and determination. One of the most famous stories concerning the construction of the home has to do with the project nearing its completion. It was a Sunday and Smithy was sitting in the living area quite downhearted because he had just \$500.00 in his bank account to install the glass for the entire home. It was the last item to be done before they could move in. A man came in and asked Smithy what was his problem? Smithy explained the situation and explained that all he had was \$500.00 to do the glazing. The next day someone came out and measured for the glass. Two weeks later all the glass was delivered and installed. Smith was handed a bill...for \$500.00. Smith was astounded. The man who had visited him and later provided the glass for this sum was Mr. Alfred Taubman. Mr. Taubman had been a student of architecture at the University of Michigan who dropped out after two years to follow different interests. It was the same Al Taubman who later built contemporary shopping malls throughout the United States. Again it was people such as Mr. Taubman that Smithy was able to draw to him in getting this home realized.

Sara Smith recalls Mr. Wright visiting the home on three occasions: 1951, 1953 and 1957. It was on the first occasion that Mr. Wright referred to the home as "My Little Gem." Mr. Wright's presence marked a highlight for the Smiths and their guests.

Over the years the home has been the center of attraction for many various artistic activities. Members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra have performed on numerous occasions with their string quartets. Members of the Hillberry Theater of Wayne State University have performed both theater and dance. Guest pianists have played on the grand piano in the living area from all over the world. Students of architecture and art from all over the globe have been welcomed to the home. People from all backgrounds, ages and interests have been welcomed and continue to be welcomed to "My Haven" (Smithy's term for the home)...a place of refuge and serenity.

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The home is intact, in excellent condition, with full documentation of all the work that was done for its construction. Besides interest in their home, the Smiths were avid supporters of the arts, particularly sculpture with works by Marshal Fredericks, Glenn Michaels, Tony Smith, and Jim Messana represented. The Smiths were not true "collector's" but rather supporters and devotees of the arts and the individuals who produced them. Many of the young artists in the Detroit area, particularly from Cranbrook, were first backed and sponsored by the Smiths. The Smith's would hold exhibitions at their home for these young artists, not only to give them a beautiful setting to show their work, but also to give these young men and women the confidence and encouragement to proceed with their art or craft.

The home also has a great wealth of books and articles concerning Frank Lloyd Wright. Smithy was such an avid admirer of Mr. Wright that anything written on Mr. Wright from 1940 to his death in 1984 can be found here. There are signed copies of Wright's Autobiography and Nature of Materials in the Smiths' library dedicated to the Smiths. Numerous articles and books have been written about the home (a partial bibliography is enclosed).

The Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Smith home is the embodiment of the "Master Architect" with a "Willing and Courageous Client." The Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Smith Foundation is currently being established. The home has been and will continue to be used for all the arts. The Smiths were avid supporters of theater, music, dance, sculpture and literature as well as the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. These arts were part of the everyday life of the Smiths. Tours of the home will be offered on an organized basis for both students of architecture and those interested in the works of Frank Lloyd Wright. It is anticipated that seminars and workshops concerning relevant design issues of the day will be offered. Support and exhibits will be sponsored for the many young artists in the area. Theater and musical groups will once again perform in the home for the benefit of all. As Sara Smith has said "the home will be for all people." Such has been and will continue to be the spirit of "My haven"... "My little gem."

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Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Smith Home

Partial Bibliography

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Reference Publications, 1991
- Heinz, Thomas A., Frank Lloyd Wright-Midwest Salt Lake City, Utah  
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A.D.A. Edita Tokyo Co. Ltd., 1976
- Hart, Spencer, Frank Lloyd Wright Greenwich, Connecticut  
Brampton Books Corporation, 1993
- Costantino, Maria, Frank Lloyd Wright Avenel, New Jersey  
Crescent Books, 1991
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Sansoni Press, 1970
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- Korab, Balthazar, Michigan Michigan  
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- Futagawa, Yukio, Frank Lloyd Wright Monograph 1942-1950 Tokyo, Japan  
A.D.A. Edita Co. Ltd., 1988
- Meehan, Parker J., Frank Lloyd Wright Remembered Washington, D.C.  
The Preservation Press, The National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1991

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Donoian and Doordan, "A Magnificent Adventure: An Interview with Mrs. Sara (Melvyn Maxwell) Smith about the Smith House by Frank Lloyd Wright"  
Journal of Architectural Education, Vol 39, No. 4 Summer 1986

Beltaire, Mark "my little gem..." \* Detroit, Michigan  
Detroit Free Press, May 23, 1951

\* There have been numerous newspaper publications done on the home but this is included in the Bibliography for it was in this article that Wright called the Smith Home "my little gem".

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**Verbal Boundary Description**

Lot 15 - Lone Pine Road Estates, a Sub. of part of S. 1/2 of Sec. 21. T. 2N., R. 10E., Bloomfield Twp., Oakland County, Michigan. (As recorded Liber 39 of Plats, Page 38, Oakland County Records.)

**Boundary Justification**

The boundary chosen is the entire property associated with the house.