



# the reactor

by Paul Azevedo

I heard the name for the first time about 35 years ago. I was a boy scout. We were hiking near Healdsburg along a rotting, abandoned railroad right-of-way.

As we passed a summer house that was imposing, at least to this 12-year-old, the lady of the house offered us something to drink. I was told that her husband was a big home builder in San Francisco.

That camping trip became a cherished childhood memory. The rotting railroad ties, sleeping under the stars, and the first time I ever heard of Henry Doelger, Builder.

**HENRY DOELGER HAS** made a powerful impression on a lot of people, and changed their lives.

Some men create houses. Doelger created communities. He was an imposing man and dominated a room, but the few times I met him, I found him the soul of courtesy.

The homes he built in his early years in the Sunset district sold so cheaply that the fire insurance now costs more each month than the original mortgage payments.

**HE SHOWED THE** way, and men like Andy Oddstad followed, to create for thousands of families the chance to own a home of their own.

His planned communities, with their uniform lots, their mandatory lawn and their mandatory palm tree, their mandatory owners associations and uniform appearance got some grumbling and lots of laughs. Malvina Reynolds saw his homes, from the back, unfortunately, and the result was the mocking "Little boxes, made of ticky tacky."

Doelger's "little boxes" have stood the test of time better than the cape cods of Westview, for example.

**DOELGER COULDN'T DO** it today. He was a giant, and the lilliputians have improved their skills. Now he would be tied down, a helpless Gulliver, hamstrung, whipsawed, delayed, and ultimately stopped. And the average family would be the loser. When he was in his heyday, he molded the community in his own image.

He made plenty of mistakes, and like the typographical error in your favorite newspaper, they are right out there in public for everyone to see.

The Bay Area would be a different place today without Westlake, and Fairmont, and the "White Cliffs of Doelger" in the Sunset.

**BUILDERS LIKE** Doelger and Oddstad, and the Gellerts learned how to build houses cheaply.

They bought light fixtures by the gross, and today when the bowl needs replacing, the hardware man doesn't ask "what kind?", but "where do you live?"

Doelger graded the hills, filled in the valleys. Even the creeks don't run the way they did in 1920 or 1940.

He sold affordable homes, and made thousands of renter urbanites into home-owning suburban commuters.

If you live in Fairmont, you see his monument all around you. If you live in a tract home anywhere, he has had an influence on your life.