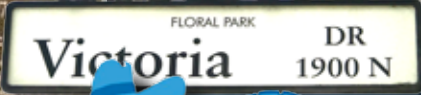


# The Historic Russell Mansion House Of Dynasties

by Dylan Almendral



**ALPHA BETA**  
*First in Quality*



The stately Neo-Classical Revival home at 2009 North Victoria Drive is easily one of the most recognizable homes on the street. Set back generously from the curb with a central portico framed by 4 fluted Tuscan columns, this home was the first home that Roy Russell (1881-1965), a well-known developer in Santa Ana, built on North Victoria Drive in 1927 at a cost of \$35,000. That is over \$517,000 in today's economy. This was far more than Russell would spend on other houses he would build on his own subdivision after he purchased the entire street and named it Victoria Drive.

From 1927 to 1934 this was the Russell Family residence and its design was heavily influenced by Maurine Russell (1889-1960), Roy's wife. She favored Plantation-style architecture as she was born in Salisbury, Missouri. She even built a grand ballroom on the top floor for entertaining. In the home, circa 1930, were Roy, his wife Maurine as head of household, daughter Nancy and son, Roy Jr. They also had a live-in housekeeper, Lottie Steskal, who hailed from Vienna, Austria.

The lasting legacy of the Russell family is in every home they built and the success they experienced in the transition of Santa Ana from town to city and the massive growth that they had their hands in. Roy Sr. kept a close connection with Santa Ana and in 1925 constructed the Pacific Building on Broadway and Third St. in Santa Ana, where he would maintain his own offices on the second floor. In 1937 he was joined by his son, Roy Rodney Russell, and in 1945 the two formed a partnership, Roy Russell & Son. The firm was active in the development of Victoria Drive and other residential tracts as well as numerous commercial improvements.

Unfortunately, during the Great Depression, the Russells were forced to sell the home and moved to 220 South Batavia Street in Orange. The house was sold to Hugh A (1878-1965) and Ethel Bosworth Gerrard (1884-1966) who would reside in the home until the late 1950s. Hugh arrived with his family in Southern California from Ontario, Canada in 1892. In the fall of 1915, Albert and Hugh Gerrard, the sons of a Disciples of Christ preacher, used their entire pooled \$300 savings to bankroll the first Gerrard's Market in Pomona. They were later joined by a third brother, Will.





By 1917, the butcher shop was flourishing and they moved operations to Orange County, opening 4 stores locally. Originally the stores were called Triangle Cash Markets, a reference to the Holy Trinity. The Gerrards' "grocerterias" offered something new. While competitors like Piggly Wiggly and Morrisons were using clerks to fill orders for customers, the Gerrards introduced self-service to their stores. Groceries were stacked in alphabetical order. As a result, "the ant powder might be next to the applesauce" (*The Alpha Beta Story* by Esther R. Cramer, 1973) and shoppers were encouraged to find their own merchandise without the aid of clerks. This new concept proved so popular that in 1919, the chain was renamed "Alpha Beta"--a reference to the alphabetical stocking system.

Within a decade, the Gerrard brothers were overseeing a business that generated sales of \$3 million a year. The 25 stores were operated by other individuals or partnerships, with Gerrard family members owning a majority interest in each. As the business became more complex, the owners decided in 1929 to incorporate--in part, to take advantage of federal tax laws providing benefits for corporations.

The chain grew rapidly, opening its first two supermarkets in 1932 as part of an "experiment." The stores--one at 318 4th Street in Santa Ana and the other in Pomona--featured huge, open cases of merchandise--the sort of no-frills display used in today's big warehouse markets. "Basically, they advertised huge displays at the bare-bones, lowest price possible," said historian Esther Cramer. "Alpha Beta was the first in the nation to have anything like a supermarket."

A Huntington Beach meat-packing plant was added in 1935 and within two years, the company bought cattle-feeding ranches, one in Santa Ana Canyon and another near Mission Viejo. The first warehouse was built in La Habra, soon after the chain moved its headquarters there in 1952. Eventually, the company opened a creamery, a bakery, Alph's coffee shops, and even an Alpha Beta Travel Service.

The acquisitions included Alpha Beta's purchase of 13 Raisin Markets in 1959, bringing the chain to 49 stores. Ironically, Alpha Beta passed up a chance to buy out Lucky in 1950. Alpha Beta became part of American Stores in 1961 and was later purchased by Lucky Brand and the Alpha Beta name was defunct as of 1995.

Alcohol wasn't sold in Alpha Beta stores until 1975, reflecting the attitude of the Gerrard brothers, who were "dead against it," recalled Claude Edwards, whose 51 years with the chain--25 of them as president or chairman--earned him the title of "Mr. Alpha Beta." Popular rumor had it that the family's Mormon faith was the reason Alpha Beta didn't sell alcohol, but the story proved to be only an urban legend.

From the 1960s to the early 2000s, the house had a succession of owners who appreciated the home, its architecture and elegance and maintained the property. In 1976, owner and local attorney David Ure installed a pool and spa on the rear of the property. The home was a Philharmonic House of Design in 1980 and was most recently featured on the 2019 Floral Park Home & Garden Tour. It sold for a record-breaking 2.45 million dollars at the end of 2019. An historic landmark, the home is #344 on the city's list of historic properties.