

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 National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. 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.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Bombeck, Erma, House

Other names/site number: _____

Name of related multiple property listing: _____

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: 162 Cushwa Drive

City or town: Centerville State: Ohio County: Montgomery

Not For Publication: NA Vicinity: NA

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ___ 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 ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide ___ local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

___ A ___ B ___ C ___ D

<p>_____</p> <p>Signature of certifying official/Title:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>	<p>_____</p> <p>Date</p>
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<p>In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.</p>	
<p>_____</p> <p>Signature of commenting official:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Title :</p>	<p>_____</p> <p>Date</p> <p>_____</p> <p>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</p>

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
 determined eligible for the National Register
 determined not eligible for the National Register
 removed from the National Register
 other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public ó Local
- Public ó State
- Public ó Federal

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	_____	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
<u>1</u>	_____	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Domestic: Single Dwelling

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC: Single Dwelling

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Modern Movements: Ranch

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Concrete, Brick, Vinyl, Asphalt

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The Erma Bombeck house is located roughly 1.5 miles from the historic center of Centerville, Ohio. The property is on a curving street in a neighborhood of nearly identical Ranch houses. The house is situated on a good-sized lawn with a deep set-back from the road. As with most neighboring properties, mature trees are in the front yard. The Bombeck House is a one-story L-shaped Ranch house, constructed in 1959. It has the basic character defining features of a Ranch house, such as an overall horizontality, low-pitch roof with an integrated porch, asymmetry, and attached garage. The Bombeck house measures 59ø x 29ø and has a lateral axis orientation to the street. The house maintains historic integrity, retaining its basic appearance from the 1960s when it was associated with writer Erma Bombeck.

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Narrative Description

The rectangular Bombeck House is a typical Ranch house of the 1950s. The tract house has a concrete, slab-on-grade foundation. It has a gabled roof and is predominantly faced with brick. The exterior brick was painted in the 1960s by the Bombeck family. A brick chimney is within the roof surface to the rear of the building.

The façade of the Bombeck House has a slightly forward projecting section, which contains two bedrooms, each with one window. (Photo 1) The lateral part of the façade contains the front door, a picture window, a smaller window and to the west a bay window. The bay window is in the location of the former garage, which was enclosed in 2007 to create an interior room. The façade is faced with brick except in the front lateral wall. Here the house was originally faced with vertical wood board and batten siding. This siding was covered with vertically-placed vinyl in 1996.

The house's original windows were replaced in 2007, with vinyl awning windows. The façade windows have shutters which were added by the Bombeck family, in the 1960s. Window openings in the brick portions of the house have header-course sills.

The east side elevation does not have any windows, as this was the location of the former garage. (Photo 2) It is a solid brick wall except in the gable end. The original wood siding of the gable end is now covered with vinyl siding. The west elevation has two openings, each with paired windows. As with the other side elevation, the original wood siding of the gable end is now covered with vinyl siding. (Photo 3)

The rear elevation is also brick-faced. (Photo 4) It has a one-story addition, which was built over the original concrete-slab patio. In the 1960s, the Bombecks encircled the patio with an aluminum-framed screen. The current owners removed the screens and enclosed the patio, creating a three-season room. This addition is faced with vinyl siding and contains one-over-one windows on each elevation. It has a gable roof and a sky light within the roof surface of each slope. A small patio is in the ell where the addition meets the original portion of the house. An exterior door from the three-season room addition and an exterior door from the former garage both lead to the patio. A small utility room is at the rear of the house, and a metal door to the west of the three-season room provides access to the furnace and hot water heater. A wood fence surrounds the sizeable back yard. The back yard has three mature trees.

Interior

On the interior, the Bombeck House is defined by the bedroom wing on the west end of the house and the public spaces on the east end. A short entrance hallway is just inside the front door. To the left, east, of the entry is the dining room. (Photo 5) The dining room has a picture

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window, a wood chair rail, tile floor, and paneling on the west wall. The wall directly above the fireplace is also paneled. Both paneled areas have been painted white. The primary character defining feature of the dining room is the two-sided fireplace, which it shares with the living room. (Photo 6) The wood fireplace mantle has a Colonial Revival influence and a brick hearth with a marble top.

A pass-through separates the dining area from the kitchen. (Photo 5) The pass-through counter has room for two chairs. A row of non-original cabinets is above the pass-through counter. The compact kitchen faces onto the front lawn. (Photo 7) An original exhaust vent is in the ceiling above the stove. The kitchen retains a recessed light fixture in the ceiling that Mr. Bombeck installed. The louvered closet doors in the kitchen are original to the house.

The former garage is off of the kitchen, to the east. (Photo 8) The space now contains a single room of contemporary materials. On the north wall, it has a bay window facing onto the driveway. A door on the south wall leads to the rear patio.

The living room is situated in the rear of the house. It is a long, open room. (Photo 9) There are three original windows still present in the living room, on the south wall. They are grouped together and face onto the former patio (three-season room). These windows are wood, one-over-one. In the living room, the double-sided fireplace has the same brick and marble hearth, as the dining room side. (Photo 10) The living room fireplace has a brick surround with paneling above it. The paneling is not painted, as it is in the dining room, and there is no mantle. Built-in bookshelves, added by the Bombecks, flank the fireplace. The living room has seven ceiling beams, also crafted by Mr. Bombeck. A sliding glass door provides access from the living room onto the three-season room.

The three-season room represents the enclosure of the rear patio. Within this space, the originally exterior brick is still exposed, on the north wall. The three-season room is comprised of all new materials and has two sky lights in the ceiling.

The west end of the house contains a hallway and three bedrooms. A small closet is located in the hallway, just past the entry. Although painted, the closet doors are the same as found in the kitchen. The main bathroom is on the south side of the hallway. It has been remodeled with contemporary materials, but retains its original configuration. A linen closet with louvered doors is at the end of the hallway. The doorways within the hall have flat metal door surrounds.

The master bedroom and bathroom is in the southwest corner of the house. (Photos 11-12) The master bedroom is roughly square, with a corner closet that projects into the room. The master bedroom has a wood chair rail, similar to the one in the dining room. Paired windows are on each exterior wall. The master bathroom retains some original design features, such as a section of yellow tile wainscoting, yellow sink and bathtub. (Photo 13)

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Two smaller bedrooms are on the opposite side of the hallway. The bedroom in the northwest corner has paired windows on each exterior wall. The smallest bedroom only has one window on the exterior wall. Each bedroom has a closet.

The house is carpeted throughout, except for tile in the kitchen, dining room, and entryway. Closet doors in the bedrooms are wood louvered doors, matching the kitchen and hallway closet doors. Some trim work has been replaced around door openings, but the majority is intact. Doors in the hallway, bedrooms, and the extant windows in the living room all have a flattened, slightly convex metal surround with a triangular corner piece.

Ranch House Definition

The very basic definition of a Ranch is a one-story house with a low-pitched roof, either hipped or gable. A further defining characteristic of Ranch houses is the horizontal emphasis, created by the low roof and the typical lateral orientation toward the street. Other common features, contributing to the overall horizontality, are deep eaves, horizontal windows, and attached garages. Porches, if there was a front porch present, were generally small, as outdoor living space had shifted to the backyard in the postwar years. Main entries vary from having minimal porches to simply being protected by projecting eaves.¹ As can be seen by this definition, the Erma Bombeck House was a prototypical Ranch house. It has all the character defining features, such as the horizontal essence, asymmetry, low roof line, lateral street orientation, attached garage, and simple linear front porch, tucked underneath the deep eave.

The Bombeck House also reflects the mid-20th century movement to modern residential floor plans. In addition to the ubiquitous attached garage, there were other characteristics that defined the modern house, whether Ranch or Split-Level: the open plan, the living room to the rear of the house, the kitchen facing the front yard, the recreation room, and large windows or window groupings allowing for maximum indoor/outdoor flow. The open space concept was often expanded by adding a study or recreation room off of the open living/dining room. These secondary rooms were sometimes separated with a half wall, curtains, or some other movable partition. Another way to achieve the open plan was the use of a counter to separate the kitchen and dining area.²

The Bombeck House retains its essential elements of the open floor plan. That concept is most evident in the pass-through between the dining area and kitchen. This characteristic of Ranch houses is an original feature of the Bombeck House, present when Erma Bombeck was living and working in the house and still present today. The linear quality of the living room also hints at an open plan. This room could easily be divided with the living room focused around the fireplace and the eastern end of the room serving as a more casual family recreational area.

¹ Heritage Architectural Associates, Kathy Mast Kane, & Nathalie Wright. *Ohio Modern: Preserving Our Recent Past, Dayton and Surrounding Area Survey Report* (Columbus: Ohio Historic Preservation Office, 2010), p.169.

² Heritage, *Ohio Modern*, p.136-137.

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Finally, the Bombeck House, like many modern houses of the day, reverses the traditional plan of kitchen placement at the rear of the house. Another change of interior configuration in modern post WWII houses was the shift of the living room to the rear of the house and the kitchen to the front. This served two functions: one allowed for greater privacy and relaxation at the rear of the house with easier access to the backyard patio and outdoors, the other consolidated the work functions in the front of the house. In his 1958 *Low Cost Homes*, author Larry Eisinger stated that the rear placement of the living room was preferred by people who value comfort, quiet and leisurely country living. When the living room is in the rear, you are not disturbed by street noises. If you are a flower fancier, you can drink in a scene of quiet beauty in your rear garden.³ (Eisinger 30) The living room was for quiet relaxation, and the front placement of the kitchen served as a control point for the house. It was seen as a convenience for the mother who could simultaneously prepare meals, clean-up after the meals, do the laundry (which was moved up from the basement creating a work center), watch the children play in the front yard, and have quick access to the front door.³ Somewhere within this sentiment of architecturally derived convenience for the housewife, one can imagine a clever Erma Bombeck response.

Historic Integrity

The Bombeck House maintains historic integrity and reflects its era of construction. The house was constructed by Don Huber, of the locally prominent Huber family. H.C. Huber Construction was founded in the 1920s by Herbert C. Huber. In the 1940s and early 50s, the company mostly focused on the Kettering area for construction of its houses and apartment buildings. In 1954, Herbert Huber died and the business was divided among his heirs. One son, Charles H. Huber, took the Huber Homes name and his portion of the business north of Dayton, establishing the community of Huber Heights. The other Huber siblings kept their portion of the family business south of Dayton.⁴ The Bombeck House, and the surrounding neighborhood, was constructed by another son, Donald Huber. Building on land platted by his father, Donald Huber constructed the neighborhood beginning in the late 1950s.

Scale, a sense of time and place, and setting are intact, both at the Bombeck House and within the neighborhood as a whole. The neighborhood, known as Washington Park when the Bombecks purchased their lot, easily conveys its c.1960 setting. The neighborhood is comprised of curvilinear streets with repetitive rows of Ranch houses. Houses have the same set-back from the street and the back yards are at least twice the depth of the front yards. The streets are lined with mature trees and there are no sidewalks. As built by Donald Huber, the majority of the houses in the neighborhood retain their original footprint with projecting gable end, integrated recessed porch, and attached garage. The houses are partially faced with brick. The use of brick was a hallmark of Huber construction, and Huber Heights, the community built by Charles Huber, was especially known for the abundant use of brick. Other materials, still seen in Donald Huber's subdivision, include wood board and batten siding at the porch and a wood scalloped

³ Heritage, *Ohio Modern*, p.137.

⁴ Heritage, *Ohio Modern*, p.121-122.

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fascia at the eave. As a result, the Bombeck House, along with the neighboring houses, has an identifiable sense of time and place. (Photo 14)

Although the Erma Bombeck House has had some alterations, they are not cumulative enough to diminish the building's historic integrity. Exterior alterations include the use of vinyl siding, replacement windows, the conversion of the garage to an interior room, and the alteration of the patio into a three-season room. The garage conversion, which represents the largest alteration with respect to typical Ranch house configuration, could be easily reversed, if a future owner chose to do so. On the interior, the largest alteration is the remodeling of the main bathroom with new materials. In other rooms, small details and materials contribute to the overall construction era of the house, such as the kitchen vent, the louvered closet doors, door trim, period ceramic tile in the master bath, and the double fireplace.

The house retains its basic appearance from the years when Erma Bombeck lived and worked in it. In fact, some alterations to the 1959-60 house were completed by the Bombeck family during their tenure. Exterior examples include the shutters added to the window openings on the façade, painting of the exterior brick, and the initial enclosure of the patio. On the interior, the ceiling beams in the living room were constructed by Bill Bombeck, Erma's husband. He also added the chair rail in the dining room, the recessed kitchen light fixture, and the paneling above the fireplace in the living room and dining room. The Colonial Revival fireplace mantle in the dining room was purchased from a c.1890 house on Roberts Boulevard, Dayton, which was being demolished.⁵ The Bombecks also added the built-in book shelves, which flank the fireplace in the living room.

At Erma Bombeck's memorial service in 1996, Phil Donahue⁶ spoke about their beginning years on Cushwa Drive. "We would entertain each other in our homes. We all had the same house. It was a plat house - \$15,500 ó three bedrooms, two bathrooms and the fireplace was \$700 extra! The Bombecks had beams in the ceiling. I mean real wood Early American beams, perfectly mitered. You kept looking for Martha Washington. Bill Bombeck made those beams all by himself. I envied those beams so much..."⁷

Although the modest Ranch house has had some alterations, it is still recognizable by members of the Bombeck family.⁸ Features added by Mr. Bombeck are still intact and the overall landscape and neighborhood setting are intact as well. And, once inside, it seems certain that Phil Donahue would recognize the living room by its ceiling beams alone.

⁵ Email communication with Bill Bombeck, May 5, 2014.

⁶ Phil Donahue was a Dayton television reporter in the 1960s. He also lived on Cushwa Drive, diagonally across from Erma Bombeck. Just as Erma gained national recognition in her writing career, Donahue went on to become a nationally well-known talk show host. He remained friends with the Bombecks, even after they all moved away from Centerville.

⁷ Bombeck, Erma. *Forever, Erma: Best-Loved Writing From America's Favorite Humorist*, Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1996.

⁸ Email communication with Bill Bombeck, July 2, 2014. Mr. Bombeck concurred with this sentiment.

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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 grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Literature

Period of Significance

1959-1968

Significant Dates

1964 (column)
1965 (syndication)
1967 (book publication)

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Bombeck, Erma

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Bombeck House meets Criterion B for its association with Erma Bombeck. Erma Bombeck was an American popular culture icon of the late 20th century. Her rise to literary fame began with a modest weekly column in a small suburban newspaper, the *Kettering-Oakwood Times*. Working from her home, she ruminated on the societal pressures placed upon the mid-20th century housewife. Expectations of perfection were high, and she humorously pointed out the irrationality of it all. The celebrated humor writer gained a national platform with the syndication of her column while living and writing at 162 Cushwa Drive, Centerville, Ohio, making the house directly associated with Erma Bombeck's early career. She began her column, "At Wit's End," in 1965, and by the time the family moved out of the house in 1968, she had been nationally syndicated, had a book published, and appeared on national radio and television programs. The Period of Significance is 1959, when the Bombecks purchased the house, to 1968, when they sold it. Although national syndication did not occur until 1965, the Period of Significance begins with 1959, because the Bombecks were the original owners and the experience of moving to the house and suburban neighborhood figured prominently in Erma's writings. The Bombeck House is being nominated at the national level of significance.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Introduction

In 1963, Erma Bombeck approached the editor of the *Kettering-Oakwood Times* with a column idea for the weekly paper. She found a lot of absurdity in the daily challenges and minutia of housework and child rearing. Her proposal was to write a humor column, aimed at the trials and tribulations of the housewife.

Erma Bombeck was not new to writing when she approached the *Kettering-Oakwood Times*. In fact, she'd worked at the *Dayton Herald* as a teenager in high school and returned to the *Dayton Herald*, after college, as a fulltime reporter. Erma married in 1949 and upon the arrival of their first child, she resigned from her newspaper job in 1953. It would be a decade before she resumed writing again, but when she did, her rise to the top was phenomenal. "Bombeck says her home at 162 Cushwa Drive in Centerville is "where I really began writing."⁹

Background History

Erma Louise Fiste was born in Dayton, Ohio, February 21, 1927. Her father, Cassius Fiste, was a crane operator for the city, and the family survived on his modest income. When Erma was nine, he died of health complications. She and her mother, also named Erma, then moved in

⁹ Bello, Marisol, et al. "The Homes of Dayton's Stars," *Dayton Daily News*, July 11, 1993.

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with her grandmother, until Erma senior remarried. Living in Dayton's Haymarket District, Erma senior took a factory job, becoming one of the few mothers that Erma knew working outside the home. The loss of her father and the resulting change in family living were challenging events for Erma. From a young age, she was fascinated with writing and literature, and this was where she found solace.

In her adolescent years, Erma became infatuated with humor writing, enjoying writers such as Robert Benchley and James Thurber. "The humor books cast a spell over Bombeck. From about the seventh grade on, she says, "I know [sic] exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to write and I wanted to write humor."¹⁰ In junior high school, she wrote for her school newspaper, the *Emerson Owl*.

Erma Fiste attended Patterson Vocational High School, where she would alternate two weeks in class with two weeks at a job. Her job was a copy girl position for the *Dayton Herald*.¹¹ She got the job by being clever enough to expect the editor's rejection. Erma declared her interest in working for the paper for her school employment assignment. When the editor said no that he needed a full-time employee, not someone who would only be there half the month, Erma ingeniously responded with the suggestion that she would find a classmate to work the other two weeks, securing her the job.

Erma's duties at the *Dayton Herald* were typically secretarial, although she occasionally was given the opportunity to write a story. Her first major story was an interview with Shirley Temple. "I did it from the angle that we were both sixteen and probably had lots in common," Bombeck says. "We didn't."¹² In 1944, Erma graduated from high school and began working at the *Herald* full-time, mostly writing obituaries.

After a year of working full-time at the *Dayton Herald*, plus a night-time job editing airplane manuals at Wright Patterson Air Force Base,¹³ Erma had saved enough money to enroll in college. In the fall of 1945, she left home for Ohio University in Athens. Studying English, she struggled with the program and left after the first year. Unlike her positive writing experiences in high school and in her employment, the experience at Ohio University did not click. Discouraged, she returned to Dayton after the first semester was completed.

Back at home, Erma enrolled in the University of Dayton as a freshman in the fall of 1946. Choosing the same major, she had a much more positive college experience at the University of Dayton. There, her professors (particularly Brother Tom Price) were supportive of her writing

¹⁰ King, Norman. *Here's Erma! The Bombecking of America* (Aurora, Illinois: Caroline House Publishers, 1982), p.8.

¹¹ At that time, the *Herald* was a daily morning paper. In 1949, it was merged with the *Dayton Journal*, another daily paper, to form the *Journal Herald*, which was published until 1986. It was then merged with the *Dayton Daily News*.

¹² King, *Here's Erma*, p.9.

¹³ Grauer, Neil A. *Wits & Sages* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p.61. The chapter on Erma Bombeck is based upon Grauer's interview with her, p.ix.

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style, and she also began writing humor columns for the student magazine, *The Exponent*. Supporting herself while in college, Erma did public relations work for the Dayton YWCA and edited a newsletter for Rike's Department Store. She graduated with a B.A. in English in 1949.

Also in 1949, Erma married William Lawrence Bombeck on August 13th. Erma and Bill had met as teenagers, while both worked for Dayton's respective newspapers. Bill Bombeck worked at the *Dayton Journal* as a copy boy during the same time that Erma worked as a copy girl for the *Herald*. Stationed in Korea, Bill Bombeck returned from a year in the Army in 1947. After his enlistment, Bill completed his studies at the University of Dayton, majoring in education.

As she had done after high school graduation, Erma began working full-time for the *Dayton Herald*, upon graduating from college. The newspaper, which was soon renamed the *Journal Herald*, employed Erma as a reporter in the Women's Department. She covered a variety of topics, but mostly ended up reporting on society related pieces. Because it was her nature, she persisted in adding comedy to stories. "Every once in a while," she recalls, "I tried to inject a humorous personal story - about some domestic thing such as going on a vacation - but newspapers were not very receptive to humor in the 1940s."¹⁴

Following Bill Bombeck's graduation from college in 1950, he was offered a teaching position at Centerville High School. Centerville was a fast growing suburban area to the south of Dayton. In 1955, Bill and Erma moved from their Dayton duplex, at 1027 Holly Avenue, to a house in West Carrollton, on Dayton's southwest side. The house, constructed by Haverstick Homes, a local builder of modest tract houses aimed at newlyweds, returning GIs, and factory workers, was financed with Bill's Army money.¹⁵ During the 1940s and 50s, Haverstick Builders specialized in small entry-level housing in the south Dayton area. Frame construction on concrete slabs, Haverstick houses typically had two bedrooms, roughly 600 square feet, and no garage.¹⁶

In early 1954, Bill and Erma Bombeck adopted their first child, Betsy. In anticipation of the adoption, Erma resigned from her newspaper job in 1953, devoting herself to the full-time job of raising a family and maintaining the household. In 1955, Andy was born. And then, in 1958, Matthew was born.

In April 1959, Erma and Bill bought a lot and house in one of Centerville's rapidly expanding neighborhoods, Washington Park. Borrowing money from Erma's stepfather to reserve the lot and place a down payment on the house's construction, the Ranch house was completed by 1960. Located at 162 Cushwa Drive, the relocation to Centerville allowed Bill to live and work in the same community. Having 1,392 square feet and three bedrooms, plus an attached garage, the house was also a step up from the Haverstick starter house in West Carrollton. The new

¹⁴ King, *Here's Erma*, p.12.

¹⁵ Email communication with Bill Bombeck, July 24, 2014.

¹⁶ Heritage, *Ohio Modern*, p.121.

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Centerville house was one among the thousands of houses targeted at second time buyers with growing young families, in the Dayton metropolitan area.

After ten years of dedicating herself to raising the children, Erma needed to do something more, something outside of the household chores. The youngest, Matthew, entered kindergarten in 1963, freeing up some time for personal pursuits. The desire to write, and more specifically to craft humor pieces, had never left her. "What she knew the most about was being a housewife and mother. I found much of it funny, and human, so I decided to write about it."¹⁷ Preparing a few sample columns, she pitched her idea to the editor, Ron Ginger, of the *Kettering-Oakwood Times*. With a circulation of 12,000, the newspaper was published weekly, serving Dayton's southern suburbs. The editor reluctantly agreed, paying \$3.00 per column, for a weekly article.

Dubbed "Zone 59," for the Centerville post office code, Erma's first *Kettering-Oakwood Times* column appeared October 17, 1963.¹⁸ Her irreverent take on daily life in the suburban household was more readily accepted than it had been a dozen years earlier. The positive response led to requests by local women's groups for guest speaker engagements. The "Zone 59" column, which Erma called the "utility-room beat,"¹⁹ was published a little over a year. Erma's fortunes were soon to change dramatically.

In early 1965, Glenn Thompson, editor of the *Dayton Journal Herald*, decided to steal Erma away from the *Kettering-Oakwood Times*. After discovering her columns, he believed that she would appeal to his readers. Offering her two columns a week under her own byline, at \$25.00 per column, Thompson sent her a letter, out of the blue, outlining his proposal. Erma accepted the proposition, thus beginning her rise to national fame.

Now called "At Wit's End," Erma's humor column first appeared in the *Dayton Journal Herald* in January 1965. It was an immediate hit with Dayton readers. Concurrently, Thompson was sending her articles to syndicates.²⁰ Concurring with his belief in Erma's talent, Newsday Syndicate of New York took on her twice weekly column. After just three short weeks of publication in the *Dayton Journal Herald*, Erma was syndicated,²¹ her writings available for purchase by other newspapers across the country. After one year of syndication, the column was published in 36 papers. Within two years, "At Wit's End" was syndicated in sixty-five newspapers.²² And, by 1971, when *Life* magazine profiled Erma, "At Wit's End" was printed three times a week in 300 newspapers, with a combined readership of 30 million.²³

Syndication brought more requests for speaking engagements, but much wider than the local scene. Syndication, by newspapers in new cities, was often accompanied by an invitation to

¹⁷ King, *Here's Erma*, p.15.

¹⁸ Byrum, Kim. "Bombeck: Writing funny is serious business," *Centerville Times*, June 18, 1988, p.10.

¹⁹ King, *Here's Erma*, p.15.

²⁰ Dempsey, Laura. "Bombeck memorabilia arrives at UD," *Dayton Daily News*, March 28, 2000, p.1a.

²¹ Dunn, Betty. "The Socrates of the ironing board," *Life*, October 1, 1971, p.70.

²² King, *Here's Erma*, p.17.

²³ Dunn, "The Socrates of the ironing board," p.66.

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speak. For several years, beginning in 1965, Erma travelled the national lecture circuit, giving six to eight presentations a year. Hundreds of people would fill auditoriums to hear her relay anecdotes about suburban life, tying the topic to her columns. "At first, Erma delighted in the trips, in meeting her fans who affirmed her life and work." She eventually left the speakers' circuit. But in 1966 it was new and exciting, and she enjoyed every minute.²⁴

Like the suburban living explosion that she had participated in, Erma Bombeck's career was rocketing ever higher. *At Wit's End*, a compilation of columns, was published by Doubleday in 1967, marking the beginning of Bombeck's book writing career. The book was modestly successful with respect to sales, but it did broaden her readership, exposing her to new audiences. It also increased her profile on the national lecture circuit. Additionally, the book's publication brought offers for radio and television appearances. By the late 1960s, Erma Bombeck was well-known enough to guest on radio and television talk shows. She appeared on the *Dick Cavett Show*, May 14, 1968, during the show's inaugural season.²⁵

In September 1968, Bill and Erma Bombeck sold their house on Cushwa Drive, moving to nearby Bellbrook, Ohio. Located on 30-acres, the farmstead property, at 3875 Upper Bellbrook Road, was a big change for the family. They moved from a small suburban house, in close proximity to the neighboring houses, to a large c.1900 farmhouse, in isolated country quiet.

Meanwhile, Erma's writing career continued to swell. She began writing a monthly column for *Good Housekeeping* in 1969 and more book deals came in the door. A second book was published in 1971. This one was a collaboration with Bil Keane, a syndicated cartoonist, who created the "Family Circus" cartoon. The book, *Just Wait Till You Have Children of Your Own*, received more literary reviews than the first, but did not fare much better financially.

The year 1971 became pivotal for the Bombecks personally. The dream of the pastoral farm life envisioned with the move to Bellbrook had not taken hold with the family, as they had anticipated. But, a visit to Phoenix for a speaking engagement, took hold of Erma. The lifelong Midwesterner fell in love with the Southwest desert. They sold the Bellbrook property, moving to Paradise Valley, in suburban Phoenix, in June 1971. Bill quickly found a position as an assistant high school principal, and Erma continued on the fast track of her career.

A third book, *I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression*, was published by Doubleday in 1974. In an effort to scale back her workload, Erma stopped writing the monthly *Good Housekeeping* column and doing the lecture circuit in 1975. The effort was short-lived, as she picked up a twice weekly gig with *Good Morning America* the same year. The newly established morning television talk show would air two to three minute comedy bits, featuring Erma. Her periodic guest appearances on radio and talk shows, which had begun in 1967, had garnered the attention of ABC.

²⁴ Colwell, Lynn Hutner. *Erma Bombeck: Writer and Humorist* (Hillside, N.J.: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 1992), p.54.

²⁵ <http://www.tv.com/shows/the-dick-cavett-show/may-14-1968-1381535/>

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In addition, Erma was in the process of writing her fourth book, an original composition not based upon previous columns. Published in October 1976, *The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank* was dedicated to her old friends and neighbors on Cushwa Drive. It was a smashing success, reaching the bestseller list, with 500,000 hardcover copies sold within two years. This book, plus the weekly appearances on *Good Morning America*, elevated Erma Bombeck to national celebrity status.

From 1975 until the early 1990s, Erma's professional life encompassed a multitude of endeavors. She compiled seven more books, wrote columns for a variety of magazines, and continued her thrice-weekly "At Wit's End" syndicated column. By the late 1980s, "At Wit's End" was published in 900 newspapers.²⁶ And, in turn, Erma herself was featured in all manner of national publications, including *Newsweek*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *People*. In 1984, she was on the cover of *Time* magazine. She was a frequent guest on the *Tonight Show* and many other popular television shows.

With all of her success and growing exposure, Hollywood was soon knocking on Erma's door. In 1978, *The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank* was adapted into a television movie starring Carol Burnett and Charles Grodin. Although the movie mostly had poor reviews and Erma herself did not work on it, the publicity led to other television offers. ABC asked her to develop a sitcom series, called *Maggie*. Erma wrote the scripts and later was asked to be the executive producer. The show premiered in September 1981, but only lasted for eight weeks before being cancelled.

Over the years, as her life and column progressed, Erma began to intersperse heavier topics into "At Wit's End." She was asked by *Newsweek* to prepare an essay about trust. Printed in the 1980s, it was entitled "Will America Regain Its Trust?" While maintaining an intense work schedule, Erma also took on high-profile political and personal challenges. She served on the President's National Advisory Committee for Women for nearly four years, appointed by Jimmy Carter in 1978. She spent more than two years traveling the United States campaigning for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. She became actively involved with the American Cancer Society. Her more serious ninth book, *I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise*, published in 1989, was about children surviving cancer.

Sadly, in the early 1990s, Erma had her own cancer scare. Although she survived it, her life was soon shortened by a hereditary kidney disease. She died on April 22, 1996, following complications with a kidney transplant. She left behind a family that had inspired her, a worldwide legion of fans, and an unbeatable literary career.

In 2000, the Bombeck family donated Erma's papers to the University of Dayton. In conjunction with that celebration, an Erma Bombeck Writer's Workshop was held. The interest and success of the workshop resulted in the establishment of a biennial workshop. "The Bombeck Workshop is the only one in the country devoted to both humor and human interest writing. Through the

²⁶ Colwell, *Erma Bombeck: Writer*, p.108.

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workshop, the University of Dayton and the Bombeck family honor one of America's most celebrated storytellers and humorists.²⁷ The workshop attracts famous humor writers, as well as novices, and in 2014, it sold out within twelve hours.

Historic Significance

The Bombeck House is being nominated under Criterion B for its association with Erma Bombeck. Although her career also included being a television personality during the late 1970s and 1980s, Erma began her career as a writer with a simple newspaper column. "Already known for her wit, Erma Bombeck's career as a humorist really began to take off in the mid-1960s."²⁸ Working out of her Ranch home at 162 Cushwa Drive, she pursued an opportunity to write for a local paper, *Kettering-Oakwood Times*, and months later the larger metropolitan paper pursued her. Within three weeks of her first columns in the *Dayton Journal Herald*, Erma's satirical musings on the tribulations of running a household were nationally syndicated.

In just three short years, from the time "At Wit" was syndicated (1965) to when the Bombecks moved out of the Cushwa Drive house (1968), Erma was a frequent speaker on a national lecture circuit (beginning in 1966). She had her first book, *At Wit's End*, published (1967). She became a regular guest on Arthur Godfrey's nationally syndicated radio show shortly after the book was published. Additionally, Erma had appeared on at least two national talk shows. She was a guest on the *Dick Cavett Show*, May 14, 1968, and on the *Mike Douglas Show*, May 22, 1968.²⁹

Delineated gender roles for women in the postwar era were the framework of Erma Bombeck's early homemaking years. Following college graduation in 1949, she began a full-time newspaper job at a time when women were being told that they should not work outside the home. During World War II, there was a shortage of male labor in the work force. As a result, women were encouraged to work in a multitude of positions that previously only men would have held. The iconic Rosie the Riveter posters specifically recruited women for factory jobs, extolling the work as patriotic duty. After the war, women were adamantly told to vacate the jobs, in order to provide work for the returning male veterans - Rosie was to be re-domesticated. Gender roles had been challenged during the war, and afterward, not to return to the home made women less womanly and men less masculine. It was a national identity crisis, where women heard that they should "abandon their wartime positions to become full-time homemakers because women's workforce participation threatened to emasculate men" and "that American women were less feminine because they competed with men in business" careers threatened to demolish femininity.³⁰

²⁷ <http://humorwriters.org/2014workshop/>

²⁸ <http://www.biography.com/people/erma-bombeck-259338#synopsis&>

²⁹ <http://www.tv.com/people/erma-bombeck/>

³⁰ Vantoch, Victoria. *The Jet Set: Airline Stewardesses and the Making of an American Icon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p.41.

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The popular media bombarded women with images of domestic bliss in the postwar years. Women were expected to marry and become housewives, and they were heavily criticized by popular culture for not conforming. Being a good housewife and mother was the new patriotism in the late 1940s and 50s. This sort of patriotism even played a role in Cold War Soviet-American relations. "The full-time homemaker and breadwinner husband were served up internationally as evidence of America's successful political and economic system."³¹

The role of women, especially white middle-class women, during this era was very carefully crafted and defined. "Femininity was almost synonymous with domesticity. Postwar advertisements in women's magazines glorified the housewife-featuring women with whiter-than-white teeth and flawless skin, living in suburban dream homes. Domesticity reigned supreme."³² The articles in the same magazines focused entirely on the concept of being a housewife. And, if a woman did not get the message from magazines, popular television shows of the 1950s, such as *Father Knows Best*, reinforced the message. In addition to the popular culture message on domesticity, nonfiction publications provided science-based declarations, "threatening women who wanted to retain their salaries and independence with neurosis and damaged families."³³ Subsequently, there was enormous pressure on women for domestic conformity, otherwise they might cause psychological harm to themselves or their children.

From the perspective of professional writing, women had a similar wartime experience as their counterparts who joined the assembly lines. "Alongside the familiar wartime icon of Rosie the Riveter, baring her muscles and ready to pitch in for American defense, was another icon, Rosie the Writer – the war correspondent, war poet, best-selling novelist, and keeper of morale."³⁴ Of course, they too were largely sent home after the war.

Though Erma Bombeck had a college degree and a burgeoning journalism career, she followed the path that was demanded of women during postwar America. In anticipation of motherhood, she quit her newspaper job in 1953. In the context of her times, she was meeting social expectations, and personally, she was ready for a change. Reflecting in an interview that she had been sick of working, "Putting on pantyhose every morning is not just whoopee time. My dream was to putter around the house, learn how to snap beans, put up curtains and bake bread."³⁵ Erma spent a decade fulfilling her dream of puttering. Although in another interview she recalled, "Those really were the happiest days for me – in Centerville with three kids under 5,"³⁶ by 1963, she was dreaming of intellectual and creative fulfillment.

³¹ Vantoch, *The Jet Sex*, p.42.

³² Vantoch, *The Jet Sex*, p.31.

³³ Showalter, Elaine. *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), p.388.

³⁴ Showalter, *A Jury of Her Peers*, p.362.

³⁵ Skow, John. "Erma in Bomburia," *Time*, July 2, 1984, p.60.

³⁶ Gregory, Gary. "Zone 59 Revisited," *The Times*, April 11, 1984, p.7a.

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Significance of Writing Career

American humor writing had been around for decades, and adolescent Erma was a big fan of the literary style, her favorite authors being Robert Benchley, James Thurber, Mark Twain, and H. Allen Smith. Jean Kerr, another female writer who parodied suburbia, was an adulthood influence, and in a *Time* interview, Erma mentions reading Kerr's work.³⁷ But, Erma Bombeck had a different perspective than other humor writers before her.

In some respects, the theme of the "At Wit's End" column evolved from an earlier attempt at poking fun of housekeeping. Following Erma's return to the *Dayton Journal Herald* in 1949, after college graduation, she was a full-time reporter. Reporting was not her strength, and in 1952, Erma ended up with a regular feature, tackling the topic of housekeeping. In an early version of the type of writing that would eventually make her famous, Erma's column for the women's page was called "Operation Dustrag."

She was ahead of her time though, and the humorous take on housework was not well received. Erma later noted that "in the 1940s, you didn't make fun of domestic chores. Housework was a religious experience!"³⁸ The "Operation Dustrag" column fizzled "the time for publicly spoofing domestic life had not yet arrived."³⁹ As the author describes in *A Jury of Her Peers*, "the fifties marked a new phase in women's domestic destiny. In the nineteenth century, women were keeping house; at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were involved in homemaking and domestic science; by mid-century they were housewives."⁴⁰ The associated language shows that in previous eras women were taking action in home maintenance, but the terminology of the 1950s had them married to the house. Consequently, "the traditional images of a heroine trapped in a gothic house, particularly apt in the postwar period when American women were repeatedly told that they were designed and destined to find fulfillment inside the home,"⁴¹ became a reoccurring theme of female fiction writers of the decade.

When "Zone 59" debuted in the *Kettering-Oakwood Times*, times had changed in the dozen years since Erma had attempted homemaking humor in "Operation Dustrag." Women were slowly returning to the workforce. Two decades removed from the end of World War II and no longer believing in the concept of housework as an art form, women were more readily willing to laugh at the quirks and stresses of childrearing and housekeeping. In short, in 1963, the time was ripe for Erma's humor.

"In American women's writing, kitchens had always been an important setting. By the fifties, these settings became increasingly ironic and dark. If the kitchen was the only room of her own for the American Eve, the only space for women's self-expression, it was a prison, and women

³⁷ Skow, "Erma in Bomburia," p.60.

³⁸ King, *Here's Erma*, p.12.

³⁹ Colwell, *Erma Bombeck: Writer*, p.39.

⁴⁰ Showalter, *A Jury of Her Peers*, p.391.

⁴¹ Showalter, *A Jury of Her Peers*, p.391.

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writers were due for a break.⁴² As a writer, Erma Bombeck created her own break. She kept a little irony, removed the darkness, added a lot of exaggeration, and incorporated some self-reflecting wit. She too used the kitchen, as well as the rest of the house, as the setting for her writing. Using parody, Erma knocked down the walls of the metaphorical kitchen prison. In 1971, she reflected, "Most of my readers are housewives. I'm saying, 'Hey, let's look at us! We've all been there. We're all in this mess together. Let's get some fun out of it.'"⁴³ Her comedic interpretation of the housewife's role produced a benign space for women to hear the antithesis of what the women's magazines had been preaching for more than a decade.

Erma's writing style, particularly her early work, was occasionally compared to Jean Kerr. Kerr had published a bestselling book, *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*, in 1957. The book was a compilation of satirical essays about her suburban life that had been previously published in a variety of magazines. Erma and Kerr had a similar style and topic matter, marriage and childrearing. A key difference was how the audience could identify with each of them. While both were writing about childrearing in suburbia, Kerr's suburbia was in upscale Westchester County, outside New York City, and Erma's suburbia was in central Ohio, at the edge of an industrial city.

Although Kerr was funny and her exasperation with young children might have felt familiar, her perspective was urban and sophisticated. She was a known Broadway playwright and in her essays wrote about what she knew, "seeing shows with her critic husband, throwing parties with intellectuals and creative people in attendance, interior decorating, buying clothes, parodying literature, and so on."⁴⁴ Kerr and her husband, also a playwright and director, lived in "a quirky, elaborate manse built by an inventor that featured turrets, a warren of rooms, two-story fireplace, and even a carillon."⁴⁵ Leaving the children with a nanny, Kerr could slip away for hours and quietly sit in her car writing.

Kerr's book likely helped pave the way for a readership that was ready to laugh at its own expectations of family life, but Erma's writing had an intuitive style that was often inward looking. She was forging a different literary path, writing to amuse herself first and foremost. "Back in the 1960s, I was a woman in the suburbs and I didn't have a voice anywhere in this world—and I literally gave myself a voice through the column," she says. "It reflected me and I had to get rid of some of it. So I just started to write honestly of what I felt, whether it was good or bad or irreverent."⁴⁶ Housewives in modest neighborhoods across the country, who did not live on eccentric estates with a carillon that played songs from *Carmen* at noon, suddenly saw themselves in Erma's amusing observations.

⁴² Showalter, *A Jury of Her Peers*, p.421.

⁴³ Dunn, "The Socrates of the ironing board," p.71.

⁴⁴ King, *Here's Erma*, p.63.

⁴⁵ <http://www.notablebiographies.com/newsmakers2/2004-Di-Ko/Kerr-Jean.html>

⁴⁶ Braden, Maria. *She Said What?: Interviews with Women Newspaper Columnists* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), p.42.

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It turned out that Erma's own thoughts also reflected the perspective of millions of housewives, who were bored and often lonely. The columns spoke to her neighbors, both literal and figurative. Erma's frustration with the notion that homemaking was an artistic pursuit that would forever fulfill women was the touchstone of her writing. She shined a spotlight on the pressures of social convention, covertly telling women that the notion of a perfect home was not realistic. Her sly insights struck a chord, and readers instantly connected with her in droves.

Though Erma's 1967 book, *At Wit's End*, was not a bestseller, it caught the attention of Arthur Godfrey, a nationally popular radio host of the mid-20th century. Discussing the book on air, Godfrey, in what was possibly reference to a Jean Kerr type, sarcastically noted that this author who portrayed herself as "just a housewife" probably lived luxuriously in a New York City penthouse.⁴⁷ In what might be the ultimate symbolism of irony, Erma was listening to the broadcast, while "kneeling on the floor of the bathroom in Centerville, laying a piece of shag carpet around the toilet." Erma wrote to him, confessing the grisly truth, and soon became a regular guest on his program.⁴⁸

While her perspective on the suburban mundane was not a complete novelty and she was working within a context of other humor writers of the era, Erma Bombeck's viewpoint was distinctive and in her own way she was attempting to elevate the role of the housewife by giving recognition to their lives. According to Erma, "she was the only humor columnist in syndication when she started."⁴⁹ Although she was massively popular, not all reviewers and critics loved her wit and writing style. However, what is more telling are the opinions other humor writers have about her and the degree to which she inspired future humor columnists, especially women.

In a sidebar article from Erma's *Time* cover story, the author notes that "Bombeck's success has spawned a split-level cottage industry. In newspapers throughout the land, local scribblers focus on the foibles of their own lives and families to win sympathetic chuckles from readers."⁵⁰ Calling them Bombeckians, he profiles four humor writers: three women and one man. One woman in particular, Carol Dykstra, was ready to give up the pursuit of humor writing, until receiving a return letter from Erma, who reassuringly told her to keep trying. The male interviewee, D.L. Stewart, had been writing a humor column for the *Dayton Journal Herald* since 1975. Today, Stewart reveals that Erma Bombeck did not inspire him to become a humor writer, but that "her columns did give me the inspiration to write about family life from a father's point of view, which was largely an unexplored area until then (this was a time before Dave Barry and Bill Cosby were writing about their families)."⁵¹ He also states that she encouraged his growth as a columnist.

Margery Elischu, a humor columnist from Maine, entitled her book *Russell Baker, Erma Bombeck & ME*, in clear reverence for the two writers. Like Erma Bombeck, Margery Elischu

⁴⁷ Colwell, *Erma Bombeck: Writer*, p.59.

⁴⁸ Skow, "Erma in Bomburia," p.64.

⁴⁹ Braden, *She Said What*, p.42.

⁵⁰ Reed, J.D. "And on Other Home Fronts," *Time*, July 2, 1984, p.61.

⁵¹ Email communication with D.L. Stewart, October 26, 2014.

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was born in the 1920s, wrote for newspapers and magazines as a young adult, and then took a break from writing. In 1970, she began writing humor columns for regional newspapers in Maine and New Hampshire. In her foreword to the compilation book, Elischu writes, "Russell Baker and Erma Bombeck are my heroes. As newspaper humor columnists they're the greatest, and, after my husband, I dedicate this book to them! If either Russell or Erma ever come to our town, I wish they'd give me a call. That way I can say to them personally: Erma Bombeck, you're the best!"⁵²

Art Buchwald was a contemporary of Erma's, writing his own popular syndicated humor column. They were friends and peers, and Buchwald considered Erma's writing special. "She was one of the few columnists who really was unique, and between her books and her column and her public appearances, she brought joy to an awful lot of people."⁵³ Art Buchwald was also a ringleader of the American Academy of Humor Columnists. Erma was the sole female in the group, which was more of a derisive club than an actual academy. In addition to Buchwald and Erma, members included Russell Baker, Art Hoppe, Gerald Nachman, Andy Rooney, and Don Ross. While the primary goal was to amuse themselves, via snippy letters written to each other, Erma's inclusion as the only woman speaks to the level of respect that she had among her male counterparts.⁵⁴

Following Erma's death, Dave Barry, well-known humor writer and columnist, summarized her role. "Erma Bombeck taught those of us who write columns that the funniest things are the things that our readers know the best: houses, cars, kitchens, and of course, kids."⁵⁵

At the same time, Ellen Goodman wrote a eulogy for Erma, which was printed in multiple newspapers across the country. Goodman, a syndicated social commentary columnist for *The Boston Globe*, spoke of the impact Erma's humorous columns had on the women's movement. "Bombeck's column was pegged, or dismissed, as 'housewife humor.' But it was, in its own way, wonderfully, deliciously subversive. When she started, suburban housewives were still pictured vacuuming in high heels in immaculate homes with perfect children. Erma Bombeck cracked open the feminine mystique her own way: with a sidesplitting laugh! She wrote with the uncanny accuracy of a fellow traveler and a born reporter! So she wrote for us all."⁵⁶

Finally, Phil Donahue, Erma's old friend and neighbor, stated in a *Huffington Post* interview, "It wasn't just that she was the best; she was the only. Erma was irreverent in many ways. Motherhood was sacred then! No one was being irreverent then. Not only did she have that sense and that courage, it took a lot of nerve to obscure all the sanctity and pretense that accompanied discussions about motherhood and being a housewife. She had a brilliant comedy

⁵² Elischu, Margery. *Russell Baker, Erma Bombeck & ME* (Augusta, Maine: Lance Tapley, Publisher, 1987), foreword.

⁵³ Edwards, Susan. *Erma Bombeck: A Life in Humor* (New York: Avon Books, 1997), p.2.

⁵⁴ Skow, "Erma in Bomburia," p.65.

⁵⁵ Edwards, *Erma Bombeck: A Life*, p.9.

⁵⁶ Bombeck, Erma. *Forever, Erma: Best-Loved Writing From America's Favorite Humorist* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1996), p.260-261.

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sense. Those two things together made her very unique, evidenced by her book sales.⁵⁷ Of course, Donahue might have been biased in the answer about his friend, but the more interesting detail is the interviewer's bias about Erma, who brings the subject up in this manner: "Let's talk about Erma Bombeck. I hear you have a long and fascinating [friendship] with Erma Bombeck, who I consider one of the greatest comedy writers America has ever produced."⁵⁸

Association with 162 Cushwa Drive

In a very literal, physical way, Erma Bombeck's writing career is associated with the house at 162 Cushwa Drive. Typing on an IBM Selectric, Erma wrote in her bedroom, on an improvised desk concocted by her husband, Bill. "She turned out her columns in a cramped bedroom, the typewriter balanced on a plank suspended between a couple of cinder blocks. The children taunted and teased each other, and through the closed doors the noise reached her, but Erma blocked it out"⁵⁹ Today, the Bombeck children recall that "she could slide out of bed and be right at her desk."⁶⁰

Printed on April 29, 1965, Erma wrote a column about Bill's penchant for do-it-yourself projects. She laments that "the do-it-yourselfers have declined, resurrected, waned and reappeared, but the sawing in our house goes on forever." While the column has a healthy dose of exaggeration, two of the items mentioned he actually constructed and are still extant in the house. "Then large ceiling beams that gave the house a Masonic lodge flavor. Eventually, he went into electricity with large fluorescent tubes in the kitchen ceiling that made you feel like you were following the seal act at the Palace."⁶¹ (See Attachment A)

One biographer states that "the Bombecks settled into suburbia quite easily. Bill Bombeck had always been a tinkerer, and now he tinkered around the new house. He also became a handyman for the neighborhood." ⁶² Along with thousands of others, the Bombeck's suburban experience took place in Centerville, Ohio. Once a quiet agricultural village, Centerville had explosive suburban growth in the postwar years. The small village, centered on the intersection of Main and Franklin streets, was surrounded by open farmland, which was ideal for the quick development of instant neighborhoods. Centerville's first large-scale subdivision was platted in 1948, by the Zengel Construction Company. The 125-acre subdivision was joined by six new plats in the 1950s. As a result, Centerville's population jumped from 827 in 1950 to 3,490 in 1960, representing a 322% increase.⁶³ Naturally, new schools, churches, and commercial buildings followed the rapid residential growth. For example, when World War II ended, all of

⁵⁷ Sterry, David Henry. "Phil Donahue on Books, TV, Mohamed Ali and Erma Bombeck," *Huffington Post*, April 4, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-henry-sterry/phil-donahue-on-books-tv-_b_5085746.html

⁵⁸ Sterry, "Phil Donahue"

⁵⁹ Colwell, *Erma Bombeck: Writer*, p.49.

⁶⁰ Boice interview with Betsy, Andy, and Matt Bombeck, April 10, 2014.

⁶¹ Bombeck, "Do It Yourself," *Dayton Journal Herald*, 04/29/1965.

⁶² Edwards, *Erma Bombeck: A Life*, p.65.

⁶³ Heritage, *Ohio Modern*, p.69.

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Washington Township's children attended school in the same building, with only 43 high school students enrolled in 1948.⁶⁴ As families flooded the area, a decades-long school construction campaign took place to keep up with demand. Enough students were enrolled, and predicted, to warrant a separate high school building, which was completed in 1955.

The family, the house, the neighborhood, all were integral to Erma's writings. Perhaps she would have become a national bestselling author while living somewhere else, but *her* house and *her* Centerville neighborhood undoubtedly shaped her literary style. Erma's specific suburban existence inspired her again and again, beyond just the "At Wit's End" column.

She fictionalized the American suburban migration for the nonfiction humor book, *The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*. The thematic book, containing interrelated stories, was Erma's first book not centered on previously printed columns. Not only did Erma dedicate the book to her former neighbors, but they were her muse.⁶⁵ (See Attachment A) "The characters are based on people I used to know," she said, "and the town is based on Centerville, Ohio, where I used to live."⁶⁶ By the time she wrote the novel-like book, the Bombeck family had moved away from Cushwa Drive. First to the old farmstead property in Bellbrook and then to Arizona.

"We finally got the farm we'd always wanted," Bombeck recalls. "The horses for the kids, the rolling grounds, the trails. Then we discovered that was not what we really wanted."⁶⁷ Given the family's misconceptions about what the experience would be like, the Bellbrook residence easily could have been the fodder for Erma's first book of original compositions, but it wasn't. Furthermore, the Bombecks' move to Paradise Valley, Arizona (also occurring before she wrote *The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*) could have been the setting for the suburban satire. At that time, Paradise Valley was a recently incorporated suburban community, which desired to keep its rural flavor. The story of a Midwestern family uprooting and going to a different kind of suburban locale in the desert, where lot sizes are a mandated one-acre minimum, also could have been the theme for *The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*, but it wasn't either. The transition of a young family moving to their new house in a new suburban development was more impactful on her imagination. Two houses and several years later, Cushwa Drive and Centerville were still the impetus for Erma's mocking tales of suburbia.

Similarly, in 1980, when Erma was developing the *Maggie* sitcom, she wanted the television show to have an authenticity. She wanted it to realistically, and humorously, reflect the struggles and foibles of everyday suburban living. To achieve that goal, she again turned to her early suburban experience. For a time during the development phase, the show was to be set in a beauty shop, where the main character would visit weekly. "A beauty shop is a very revealing place," Erma was quoted as saying by the *New York Times*. "People are so candid and frank there." She said that she had patterned her sitcom shop on the shop she used to go to in

⁶⁴ Heritage, *Ohio Modern*, p.70.

⁶⁵ The dedication page reads, "For Marianna, Helen, Charmaine, Marie, Lil, Mary Ellen, and Annie, who when I was drowning in a car pool threw me a line— always a funny one." See Attachment A.

⁶⁶ Edwards, *Erma Bombeck: A Life*, p.106.

⁶⁷ King, *Here's Erma*, p.18.

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Centerville, Ohio ó complete with pink poodle wallpaper on foil.⁶⁸ Ultimately, the show's focus shifted back to the housewife in the kitchen, loosely modeled on Erma and Bill's life, but still set in Dayton.

Conclusion

Published in 1967, Erma's first book, *At Wit's End*, was completed while living at 162 Cushwa Drive. The book reached a different audience than the newspaper column, embracing many women who read mostly library books and lived in areas of the country where her column was not printed, including some metropolitan areas. The publication of *At Wit's End* was an enormous leg up for Bombeck the humorist. Reviews were few and far between, but she did become established as a humorist with a national reputation.⁶⁹

As discussed above, Erma Bombeck's house, at 162 Cushwa Drive, was the setting for her literary aspirations and the location where she established a national reputation as a humor writer. The typical suburban house (and neighborhood) was an important touchstone later in her career too, as the setting for the bestselling *The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank* and a sitcom. The Bombeck House maintains historic integrity. Although subsequent owners have made alterations to the house, it still reflects its era of construction. It maintains its sense of scale, time and place, and setting. Many of the alterations made by Bill Bombeck, and written about by Erma, are still intact, including the ceiling beams and kitchen light fixture. Additionally, the neighborhood and overall setting are intact. Most of the houses along Cushwa Drive have had their windows replaced or other small changes to materials, but the neighborhood continues to exemplify a c.1960 subdivision. The appearance of both the house and neighborhood are still recognizable to the original occupants.

In her biography on Bombeck, Edwards writes, "Her success was a sudden and dizzying one, in spite of the fact that she had been writing columns most of her life. It was as if the world had been waiting for the right moment to celebrate her. And now, in 1965, with the chaos of John F. Kennedy's assassination finally beginning to subside and the revolution of the 1960s solidifying in the national consciousness, it was time for Erma's raised-eye-brow look at the suburban dream."⁷⁰ For Erma Bombeck, that right moment in 1965 occurred in her own suburban dream, in a quintessential Ranch house, at 162 Cushwa Drive, Centerville, Ohio.

⁶⁸ Edwards, *Erma Bombeck: A Life*, p.140.

⁶⁹ King, *Here's Erma*, p.117.

⁷⁰ Edwards, *Erma Bombeck: A Life*, p.81.

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McCarty, Mary. "A decade after her death, Bombeck's wit still inspires," *Dayton Daily News*, April 23, 2006.

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Stewart, D.L. "A funny thing happened on the way to the septic tank," *Dayton Journal Herald*, October 23, 1976.

Interviews and Correspondence

Betsy, Andy, and Matt Bombeck ó Martha Boice, April 10, 2014: Conversation concerning historic association with the house at 162 Cushwa Drive, Centerville and Erma Bombeck's early writing career. Betsy, Andy and Matt Bombeck are the three children of Erma and Bill Bombeck.

Bill Bombeck ó Nathalie Wright, April 30, July 2, and July 24, 2014: Email communication concerning alterations made by Bill Bombeck to 162 Cushwa Drive, Centerville and confirmation of historic details. Bill Bombeck was Erma Bombeck's husband.

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Betsy Bombeck ó Nathalie Wright, July 8, 2014: Email communication concerning alterations made by the Bombecks to 162 Cushwa Drive, Centerville.

D.L. Stewart ó Nathalie Wright, October 26, 2014: Email communication regarding professional relationship with Erma Bombeck. D.L. Stewart is a nationally syndicated humor columnist for the *Dayton Journal Herald*. He and Bombeck eventually met, becoming friends, and Erma wrote a foreword for one of his books.

Websites

- Erma Bombeck: <http://www.biography.com/people/erma-bombeck-259338>
<http://www.ermamuseum.org/home.asp>
<http://www.tv.com/shows/the-dick-cavett-show/may-14-1968-1381535/>
http://www.allliteraryauthors.com/Erma_Bombeck.htm
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<http://parade.condenast.com/276183/nancyberk/showbiz-analysis-with-phil-donahue/>
- Margery Eliscu: <http://obituaries.pressherald.com/obituaries/mainetoday-pressherald/obituary.aspx?pid=18705451>
- Jean Kerr: <http://www.notablebiographies.com/newsmakers2/2004-Di-Ko/Kerr-Jean.html>

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- 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 # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State agency
 - Federal agency
 - Local government
 - University
 - Other
- Name of repository: University of Dayton: Erma Bombeck Archives

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|--------------|------------|
| 1. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

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Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

- | | | |
|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. Zone: 16 | Easting: 744376 | Northing: 4391725 |
| 2. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The nominated boundary is comprised of Montgomery County Auditor parcel number O68 00122 0012.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The proposed boundary includes the lot and house historically associated with 162 Cushwa Drive.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Nathalie Wright, Historic Preservation Consultant
organization: Prepared for Centerville-Washington Township Landmarks Foundation
street & number: 349 E. Tulane Rd.
city or town: Columbus state: Ohio zip code: 43202
e-mail nwright66@yahoo.com
telephone: _____
date: November 2014

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Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Bombeck, Erma, House

City or Vicinity: Centerville

County: Montgomery County

State: Ohio

Photographer: Nathalie Wright Date Photographed: February 21 and June 5, 2014

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

1. Façade, looking south
2. Façade and east elevation, looking southwest
3. Façade and west elevation, looking southeast
4. Rear elevation, looking north
5. Interior, dining room, looking east
6. Interior, dining room, fireplace detail, looking southeast
7. Interior, kitchen, looking northwest
8. Interior, former garage, looking north
9. Interior, living room, looking east
10. Interior, living room, fireplace detail, looking north
11. Interior, master bedroom, looking north
12. Interior, master bedroom, looking southwest
13. Interior, master bathroom, looking west
14. Neighborhood setting, looking northwest

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