

The Next Page: Barry Dierks left Pittsburgh for Paris and designed more than 70 houses on the French Riviera

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By Marylynne Pitz / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

While studying architecture at Carnegie Institute of Technology, Barry Dierks never made an 8:30 a.m. class because he devoted that time to matching his tie with his socks.

When the young Edgewood resident earned his degree in 1921, the school's yearbook described him as "an arbiter of taste," a phrase Dierks exemplified during a fruitful, nearly 50-year career.

Degree in hand, Dierks soon arrived in Paris to study architecture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. France became his home and, between the 1920s and 1950s, he designed or remodeled more than 70 modernist villas on the French Riviera. Many of these dreamy dwellings still stand while others have been converted to apartments. A few have been badly neglected by Russian oligarchs.

To support himself initially in Paris, Dierks took a job at a bank where he met his lifelong partner, Eric Sawyer, a British engineer and landscape architect. In the Ritz Hotel on the Place Vendome, the two men met British novelist Somerset Maugham and playwright Noel Coward. Dierks and Coward discovered their common background — both were sons of piano salesmen.

Aware that the French Riviera was attracting more American and British expatriates, celebrities and royals, Sawyer, a distinguished World War I veteran, bought land on the Cote d'Azur, the Mediterranean coast famed for its aquamarine water. By 1927, work was finished on the couple's stunning beachhead — a white modernist home with seven bedrooms and five bathrooms.

Built into a steep hillside 6 miles west of Cannes, the duo's villa became an architectural advertisement for wooing wealthy clients. Still in use today, Villa Le Trident features a star-shaped pool, an outdoor terrace for dining by candlelight, a flat-roofed solarium, Moorish arches and balustrades around a first-floor balcony. Vaulted white ceilings and archways contrast with black tiled floors. Dierks and Sawyer named it Le Trident because, to them, the rocks below the house resembled the three-pronged spear

held by Poseidon, classical mythology's god of the sea. They carved that symbol at the home's front entrance.

"What they wanted was something secluded by the sea," said Maureen Emerson, author of the 2018 book "Riviera Dreaming: Love and War on the Cote D'Azur."

What the two men needed were clients. Their urbane charm, energy and talents soon gave them entree into a select social circle. They became fixtures at a whirl of cocktail parties, balls and private dinners on the French Riviera.

Maugham, a gay novelist best known for "Of Human Bondage" and "The Moon and Sixpence," asked Dierks and Sawyer to remodel an existing home for him, which he christened "La Mauresque." Dierks substantially altered the facade and interiors while Sawyer laid out terraced gardens of oleanders as well as orange, lemon and avocado trees.

The next commission was extravagant because it came from the showy Maxine Elliott, a Broadway and Hollywood actress turned wealthy grand dame who hosted dinners for England's King Edward VII and his entourage. The king described life on the French Riviera as "one great garden party."

For the exacting Elliott, Dierks and Sawyer designed Chateau de l'Horizon, a white palace that appeared to float on azure water. Her friend, Winston Churchill, the future British prime minister, delighted in coasting down a 25-foot-long water chute that led from the edge of the villa's saltwater swimming pool into the Mediterranean. Churchill relished luxury and Elliott enjoyed his humorous wit. Her other guests included Hollywood stars Douglas Fairbanks and Johnny Weismuller, who played "Tarzan."

Next door to Elliott's home stood Le Roc, built for Lord and Lady Cholmondeley. Distinguished by Bauhaus influenced curves and cubic shapes, Le Roc had five bedrooms, salons, a dining room, a pool and five bedrooms for servants. Lord Cholmondeley, whose first name was George, was known as "Rock" and enjoyed exercising naked.



Life for Europeans changed dramatically after Britain and France declared war on Germany in September 1939. France, which requisitioned cars, planes, ships and animals, called six million men between the ages of 20 and 45 to military service.

Rarely idle, Dierks and his friends organized the Anglo-American Ambulance Corps of Cannes and established a day care for children whose mothers were forced to work and could not look after them while their absent, bread-winning husbands were in uniform.

After Italy declared war on France in 1940, Sawyer stayed in seclusion at the Villa Trident. But the British engineer joined the resistance and the remote house he shared with Dierks was the perfect spot to hold secret meetings. Sawyer served during World War II as a staff officer in North Africa and Italy, then joined the French part of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, which planned the invasion of Europe.

As an American in France during WWII, Dierks was free to come and go. He worked closely with the American Red Cross, making sure to supply every child he knew with dried milk and other rationed foods. He also delivered food and clothing to prisoners of war housed at the Fort de la Revere in a medieval village high above Monaco.

After German troops swept into southern France in November 1942, Dierks was arrested. On Nov. 11, 1942, he boarded a train with more than 120 Americans, including diplomats, nine children, journalists and Red Cross workers.

For two months, the Americans lived in small hotels in Lourdes, France. Then, they were sent by train to Baden-Baden, a German resort town in the Black Forest. Housed at the elegant Brenners Park Hotel, the Americans had comfortable quarters and maid service and were allowed to play tennis, swim in a local pool and walk in the forest, always accompanied by a guard.

By July 1943, Dierks wrote to his mother in Pittsburgh that he was designing scenery and costumes for a play staged by the Americans. Following negotiations between the Germans and Americans, the Americans left their hotel in February 1944 and moved to France. Then, they were transported on a “hell train” with no food and little water to Lisbon.

From that Portuguese port, Dierks and nearly 600 other passengers sailed in March 1944 to Jersey City. His mother greeted him when he disembarked and the two returned to his boyhood home at 335 Locust St. in Edgewood. Dierks gave an interview to the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, describing how, to stay occupied, he spent his time in Germany designing future homes and teaching architecture.



After the liberation of France in August 1944, Dierks returned to Villa Le Trident, which had been occupied by Nazis and Italian troops. He began restoring the home while also working energetically for the Civilian War Relief of the American Red Cross, based at the Carlton Hotel in Cannes.

Ruth Cowan, a war correspondent, befriended Dierks and he wrote to her in July 1945 with news that his beloved Sawyer would soon return from serving in the British Army.

“The Coast is swarming with Americans on leave. So the nights are hideous with songs. Why do Americans always sing when they get drunk, and why do they choose my corner of the Carlton to sing

at?”

Dierks and Sawyer were on the guest list when Grace Kelly married Prince Rainier in 1956, a sure sign that they were part of the international set. Four years later, Dierks died in the home he had designed on a red rock face in the Esterel Mountains. Sawyer lived on for another 25 years, raising money for the Sunny Bank Hospital, playing bridge and always drinking two martinis before dinner.

He also fed pigeons' eggs to his small white dog, Peter. The military veteran died at his villa in March 1985 and rests in a simple grave next to his lifelong partner. A trident marks the gravestone.

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