

THE MAN WHO MOVED LOS ANGELES

By Lisa Stone



In the heart of downtown Los Angeles, at the corner of Eighth and Olive Streets, stands the Commercial Exchange Building, an elegant 13-story Beaux Arts structure. It was, for a time, one of the tallest buildings in downtown Los Angeles. By 1935, it had housed businesses ranging from the Owl Drug Company to the offices of legendary fantasy author Edgar Rice Burroughs, the creator of Tarzan.

But in 1935, the Commercial Exchange Building was nearly destroyed when civic leaders decided to widen Los Angeles' streets to accommodate the area's surging growth. The success of the shipping, oil and film industries, as well as the popularity of the automobile was putting pressure on downtown thoroughfares. The solution: widen the streets.

The architects of the Commercial Exchange Building, Walker & Eisen, whose creations included the Fine Arts Building and the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Beverly Hills, scrambled for a way to save their building, which because of the new ordinance now extended five feet over street lines. They could conceive of only two possibilities: tear it down and rebuild, or shear off the attractive and desirable office space frontage overlooking Olive Street – one of the building's best assets.

Desperate to avoid demolition, the owners tried one last resource – a man who despite his lack of formal training had steadily built a reputation for performing miracles of foresight and engineering on the city's houses and buildings.

George R. Kress, who believed the solution to any problem lived within the problem itself and just needed to be coaxed out, made a proposal that was intimidatingly complex yet elegantly simple: cut eight and one-half feet out the middle section of the building and move the 5,000-ton western section back five feet, away from the street lines, and then fill the remaining three-and-one-half-foot space with the structures necessary to join the two pieces together. What's more, Kress' plan would cost half as much as replacing the building and no one involved would miss a single day of work. Nothing like it had ever been attempted, but the owners determined that it just might work.

The building had found its savior, and soon after, the Commercial Exchange Building displayed an enormous sign across its side which read: "Commercial Exchange Building, Los Angeles, Calif., Highest Building Ever Moved in the World, Made Possible by George R. Kress, Patented Methods, 1935 – Kress House Moving Co., Contractors, Los Angeles, Calif."

Kress and his company of 20-odd men braced each side of the building and proceeded to cut out an eight-and-one-half-foot section from ground to roof. This section had previously been used for storage and hallways, so no one who worked in the office building was inconvenienced by its removal. The crew also excavated to a depth of 10 feet below the foundation to facilitate new concrete pilings and make room for the jacks, rollers and tracks needed for the move. This preparation process took 70 days.

On the final day, 75 men took nine hours to move the massive western section back from the street towards its other half. They used Kress' patented mammoth screw jacks with machined threads pushing the massive



George R. Kress
George R. Kress Collection



The 14-story Commercial Exchange Building was cut into two sections, a five-foot section removed, and the two remaining sections joined back together. It was considered one of the greatest engineering feats of its time. *The George R. Kress Collection*

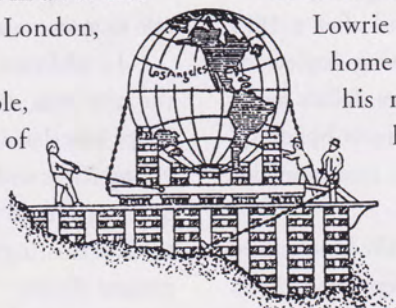
structure three-eighths of an inch forward with every turn. Fourteen pulling/bracing rods held the building steady. A window was then added to each level, restoring the façade to its appearance before the move. The entire operation took only two-thirds of the allotted time, with not a single accident or substantial injury to the workers.

The move became a huge media event. A crowd gathered to watch the building being moved and remained well into the night. And the following day, awestruck headlines announced the feat in all of Los Angeles' papers and as far away as London, England.

It was the pinnacle of the remarkable, productive, yet largely forgotten career of George R. Kress, a man who embodied the enterprising and visionary spirit of the era that brought us the Empire State Building, the Golden Gate Bridge and Hoover Dam. Kress possessed the determination and work ethic necessary to prosper despite the Depression and the conviction that

a man can accomplish great things. "George Kress was a man who loved a challenge," says Rodney Kemerer, who has organized an impressive archive on the life of Kress. "He took on the jobs that everyone else said were impossible, jobs that conventional wisdom said could not be done. The more difficult the problem, the more energized he became and, consequently, the more creative his solutions."

Born in Pittsburgh in 1882, the middle of three sons of George Richard Kress, Sr. and Martha Lowrie Kress, the younger George Kress left home at the age of 14, following the death of his mother, to join his brother's budding house moving business, the Kress House Moving Company of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Under his brother's apprenticeship, Kress taught himself by doing, and by the time he turned 30, he was ready – without ever having studied engineering in a classroom, much less attained a degree – to set up shop on his own.



**If we had room to work
we could move the world**

The Kress House Moving Co.'s logo.
The George R. Kress Collection



The Alhambra Hotel was moved northward to make more room for the new Hall of Justice. Los Angeles, 1926.
Notes on the photograph were written by George R. Kress. *The George R. Kress Collection*

In 1913 Kress moved to Los Angeles, quickly acquired the D. R. Tripp House Moving Company, and created the Kress House Moving Company of Los Angeles. Kress spent the next few years building up his business, moving houses and smaller structures at first, and then graduating to larger buildings. Kress also provided seismic and geologic stabilization assistance to property owners. And after a 1921 earthquake, Kress was credited with saving Inglewood property owners "no less than half a million dollars by his expert advice as to the restoration of business buildings" when other Los Angeles architects had recommended demolition.

By the mid-1920s, he had moved literally hundreds of buildings. Interviewed for a widely reprinted 1925 newspaper article, he explained that, "The growth of business districts is overlapping even the more recently established residential districts. On the main traffic arteries one- and two-story stores and office buildings

have supplanted homes. In many instances the onrush of business demands the departure of fine modern houses. Owners have found it highly profitable to sell the lots for business purposes, move their homes which have been built exactly to their desires, purchase sites in outlying sections and in many instances have enough funds left over from the sale to renovate and repair the house."

In addition to the reshuffling of residential zones, the city was also enacting new zoning ordinances to adapt low density property for higher density uses, providing Kress with the opportunity to reposition buildings on their lots to make way for new construction or even to raise existing structures to enable the erection of new ground floors.

Though house moving had become so common in Los Angeles that newspaper stories began to refer to it as "Wandering House Syndrome," Kress garnered the most attention, from his latest engineering accomplishments to

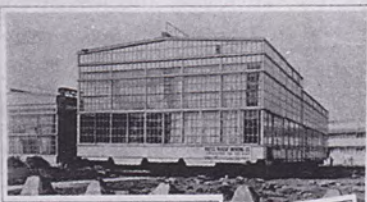
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KRESS House Moving Company, Incorporated

STRUCTURAL MOVING ENGINEERS

PROTECTION AND ECONOMY INSURED BY George R. KRESS Patents

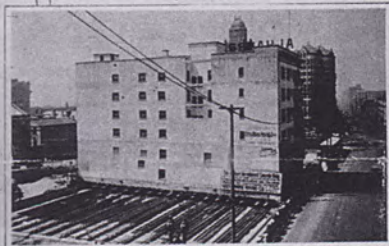
807 California Street
LOS ANGELES, CAL.



Steel and glass stage, moved for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studio.



Moving front wall of building with George R. Kress patent devices.



Six-story, reinforced concrete building moved for the County of Los Angeles.



Moving large apartment building in Pasadena, California.



End view of wall moved by George R. Kress Patent devices.



Section of building moved with same patent devices.



Three-story brick apartment building, 50x110, moved by the George R. Kress method.



Reinforced concrete school building turned around and moved two blocks.



Brick mansion moved in three units.



Showing structure moved by George R. Kress patented non-cross timber method.



Brick and stone mansion moved in two units.

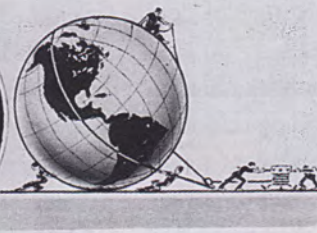


Section of four-story brick building moved with George R. Kress patent bracing devices.

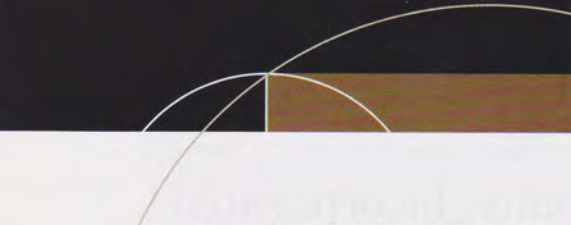
LOS ANGELES has rapidly come to the front as a city of efficiency. The accompanying photographs illustrate the wonderful advancement which this city has made in the science of moving heavy structures, and furthermore can boast of having as its representative a structural moving company, the president of which holds the only patents in existence which makes the moving of buildings or sections of buildings possible with absolute safety, speed and economy.

The methods used by this organization are far in advance of anything in the United States. The recent census has placed Los Angeles fifth in population, and because of this tremendous growth the West has found it necessary to devise ways and means of coping with the situation. This the Kress organization has ably done, as is indicated by the photographs on this page, which are but a small representation of the diversified structures it handles, not only in the City of Los Angeles, but all over the Western states.

This Company has been in existence on the Coast for twenty years and its service to the public is of inestimable value in that it has salvaged not only innumerable commercial structures, but the homes of many prominent residents where sentiment exists because of family ties.



Kress House Moving Company, Inc. newspaper advertisement, 1931. *The George R. Kress Collection*



the kind of car he drove. His name even provided the punch line to a gossip column in a 1922 edition of the *Los Angeles Evening Herald*. In "Today's Best Rumors" – amid tales of movie deals and studio maneuverings – columnist Guy Chrise describes actor/manager Billy Garwood's desire to move not just a house but a 400-acre ranch "brought down from up Fresno way and deposited in Los Angeles... So, here's a chance for you, Mr. Kress."

In the kind of stunt for which Kress became known, he moved the Patten & Davis Lumber Company on steel tracks to the lot next door without cutting off the power or inconveniencing any of its employees, who worked in the building throughout the entire operation. That year, he and his craftsmen moved what was the Friday Morning Club from South Figueroa to the corner of Menlo Avenue and San Marino where it became the Catholic Women's Club. A massive 60-by-140-foot, 800-ton structure – making it, at the time, the largest building ever moved in Los Angeles – the building was cut into five sections and moved three-and-one-half miles.

In 1924 Kress accomplished yet another miracle of engineering. When faced with the task of moving the six-story, 11,000-ton Alhambra Hotel a distance of 110 feet, he devised and carried out a plan that ultimately used only six horses to manipulate thousands of tons of dead weight. This feat required over a mile of track, 1,400 jacks and 1,700 rollers. He expressly sought out horses bred to step high in order to step over the intertwining cables. At the time, people compared Kress' accomplishment to the building of the pyramids. The hotel was moved from its site at Temple and Broadway to make way for the new Hall of Justice, which has since become an area landmark.

1924 was a high point for Kress, who moved 250 buildings and generated over \$1 million in work. His accomplishments that year included moving the J.B. Van Nuys House, a four-story, 250-ton house which was cut in half and moved three-and-one-half miles from Sixth Street to Windsor Square. In the same year, at the Forest Lawn Cemetery, he moved a cobblestone arch that measured a cumbersome 32 feet across and weighed 100 tons.

He once again became the center of press attention when he moved the 24-room Howard Verbeck house. It was the largest residence west of the Mississippi River ever moved, and Kress made the most of it. He cut the house

into 2 sections and moved them from the corner of Wilshire and Rampart to Larchmont Village while the undaunted owners and their guests danced the night away inside.

In researching Kress' work, Kemerer went to the location of the Verbeck House and was awestruck by its sheer size. "That was the day that I began to have incredible respect for George Kress. I looked at this massive 10,000-square-foot house and thought: 'How could anybody move this?' Much less with a party going on inside of it. But that really is key to who George Kress was. It wasn't enough to move an enormous house, it had to be full of people at the same time. He was a little like Houdini, adding that extra chain and padlock just to make it even more impossible."

In the atmosphere of nearly constant change that dominated Los Angeles at the time, the concept of historic preservation was presumably not first on anyone's mind. But Kress nonetheless contributed to the preservation of structures tied to Los Angeles' history that were created by some of the most respected architects in the region. The Bullock House, for example, was designed by noted Pasadena architects Arthur and Alfred Heineman and is considered one of the best remaining examples of their Craftsman style. John C. Bullock, the founder and president of Bullock's Department Store, enlisted Kress to move his three-story, 12-room house and two-story detached garage from 627 South Ardmore Street to 605 South Plymouth Boulevard, in 1925.

Just across the street from the Bullock House, Kress worked with architects Sumner Hunt and Silas Burns, designers of such noteworthy Los Angeles structures as the Automobile Club of Southern California and the Ebell Club, to relocate the Sarah Hall House, which he moved to Plymouth Boulevard.

Kress also became a valuable asset to the movie industry, which found itself growing at a frantic pace. When Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was formed in 1924, Kress was contracted to move four soundstages and two dressing rooms from the Metro Picture Corporation lot in Hollywood 12 miles to MGM's historic Culver City lot. The glass stages were moved without a single crack in the glass or shifting of the bolts. He also raised and buttressed Stage 7 (now Stage 16) on the Warner Bros. Lot in Burbank, making it, at 92 feet, one of the tallest soundstages in the world. Kress' grandson, Skip Franklin, recounts that his grandfather was often called to film sets to quickly and

efficiently move scenery using his engineering skills.

The wealthy often saw their neighborhoods declining and enlisted Kress to help them relocate without having to build a new home. In 1931, he moved a Georgian mansion for the widow Mrs. James C. Drake from 28th and Hoover to 70 Fremont Place. This huge structure, with a solid copper roof and mahogany interiors, had to be cut into four sections and moved 5 miles. He also moved all the landscaping. Her love for the house reflected her love for the life she had lived there with her late husband. The house itself had been built in 1911 for \$100,000; the move cost her \$150,000.

Kress' reputation in the press as a man who performed the impossible grew to almost mythical proportions. No structure, regardless of size, materials, weight or function, seemed immune to his ability to move things. He called it engineering "second sight." As he told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1925, "Being of an analytical turn of mind I have for years made a special study of mechanical stresses and strains and from experience can tell just how a building will 'act' after it has been lifted by our jacking devices from its foundation."

Notes Lindsay Doran, Kemerer's wife and partner in researching George Kress, "He seems to have been able to 'feel' a building, to know instinctively where it was strong and where it was weak – like a doctor who can go beyond what he's learned in medical school to detect the strengths and weaknesses in a body."

A record of Kress' achievements shows the ever-expanding scope of his work. In March of 1925, he moved



The Aaronson residence was moved from Wilshire Boulevard to Fremont Square. This two and one-half story, 40-room Beaux Arts-styled mansion was cut into three sections, each weighing 400 tons.

The George R. Kress Collection



The right section of the Aaronson residence being moved.

The George R. Kress Collection

an 80-foot-long greenhouse 12 miles to the Westwood estate of Arthur Letts, Jr., heir to the Broadway Department Stores. Once again, not a single pane of glass was broken or cracked.

For banking heir Marco Hellman, Kress moved the largest residence ever moved at that time in America. Kress cut the house – a 2 and one-half story, forty-room Beaux Arts styled mansion – into three 400-ton sections, and moved it from Wilshire Boulevard to Fremont Square.

In 1926, he moved the H. Dalzell Wilson House, an aerial-style Swiss chalet, from 2891 Marenga, over the top of an orange grove, and deposited it in another location. Among the high schools he moved are those in Compton, Gardena, North Hollywood and Orange. He is said to have moved, for reasons unknown, the entire town of Fallbrook, California to another site and raised a 250-foot wooden ship that was buried in the sand at the

Chandler Shipyards after city engineers had given up on it. In 1931 he rotated the Brunswick Drug Company 90 degrees, then moved it out of the way of the northerly extension of Spring Street from Temple, where the building was altered for reuse as county offices. In 1940 he moved a 350-ton gas tank cluttering up the desert vistas of Palm Springs to a less offensive site behind a hill.

Throughout his career, Kress proved to be an expert not only in inventing and innovating, but also in promoting his work. He filed for and received three U.S. Patents: two for "Means and Methods for Moving Large Buildings" and one for "Building Wall Moving Devices." He also invented what was at the time the largest truck in

the world – a one-of-a-kind vehicle made of steel with 1,000 rollers, which he used to move several two-story buildings.

A consummate showman, Kress put signs like the one that had appeared on the Commercial Exchange Building on every structure, no matter how large or small, that he moved. He also created special pamphlets and hired a clipping service to monitor his press attention.

Kress lived a somewhat nomadic existence in the 1920s, including long stays at the fashionable Los Angeles Athletic Club and the Jonathan Club. But on August 25, 1930, he married Wanda Cooper Taylor of San Francisco and his life took an important turn that would facilitate one

of the most meaningful projects of his lifetime – the building of a home for himself and his family.

In spite of the hundreds of structures he moved, Kress only built one house. He hand-picked the site, a 6-acre lot on a hillside in remote Benedict Canyon, and gave very specific directions to the architect, Harry J. Muck, and the construction crew. What he built, and what stands today, is a living expression of who he was, and its striking combination of strength and grace hint at a builder so unusual that ultimately it was Kress' own house which prevented his story from being lost forever.

The George R. Kress House, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places through Kemerer's efforts on its behalf, is a two-story Tudor revival with Germanic and French medieval traditions. Built to last, the house has a foundation reinforced with 22-inch concrete footings, a practice that was highly unusual for residential buildings. Wall plates and sills are bolted to a depth of six inches, which was not standard at the time, and the exterior brick wall veneer is anchored to the structure by galvanized iron crimped ties attached to every fourth course. In the nearly 70 years since it was built, the house has remained virtually intact.

More than six decades after Kress built his house in Benedict Canyon, Rodney Kemerer and Lindsay Doran purchased it with no knowledge of the man or his career. They were initially struck by the house's timeless beauty, but as its uniqueness revealed itself to them, they were driven to find out more about the person who had constructed it. "I was constantly amazed by how the house was built," Kemerer says. "So much care went into it. After 70 years and various owners, any building begins to show its weaknesses. The Kress House looks today exactly as it did the day it was finished, and all of its original systems work perfectly. I developed a deep curiosity about who would have built a house like this."

Kemerer perused county records, birth, marriage and death certificates, discovering that the house had been built by a house mover



Rodney Kemerer and Lindsey Doran Kemerer standing in the front door of their home, The George R. Kress House. The house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, The California Register of Historical Resources and is designated as a Historic-Cultural Monument of the City of Los Angeles. The brick and stone Tudor Revival country house is located in the Santa Monica Mountains in Beverly Hills, California. *Berger/Conser Photography*

named George R. Kress who had died in the 1970s. He finally came across the name Dianne Kress Franklin, whom he learned was George Kress' daughter. A letter to Mrs. Franklin was answered by her phone call, which led in turn to many visits by the Franklin family to the Benedict Canyon house, a house that Mrs. Franklin had not seen in more than 50 years. And in those visits, Mrs. Franklin provided enough information to more than satisfy Kemerer's curiosity.

Mrs. Franklin revealed that, in true Kress fashion, her father had preserved all of the plans, drawings and specifications used to build the house in Benedict Canyon. Examinations of the complete set of blueprints, and of the geological and structural studies, confirm the home's extraordinary design. "It became clear that throughout his remarkable career of moving and rearranging structures, a solid, permanent and elegant house was the most personal statement he could have made about who he was as a man," says Kemerer. Franklin also showed Kemerer and Doran her father's business correspondence, as well as his collection of newspaper articles and photographs of the Kress House Moving Company's most illustrious projects.

They learned that when the business of moving buildings began to fade in both popularity and practicality, Kress reinvented himself several times. During World War II he used his engineering skills to help launch ships out of Wilmington harbor, and he spent his later years in real estate development in Orange County. Kress died in 1972, seven weeks shy of his 90th birthday.

In the years following the initial contact, Mrs. Franklin and her adult children painstakingly returned original furnishings to the house, including a remarkable painting of the house as it stood, alone on the hillside, in 1931. After having passed along the only living record of her father through an oral history, Dianne Kress Franklin passed away in October of 1998.

The scope of Kress' achievements cannot be summed up in a handful of examples, for Kress' thumbprint can be found at the city's core and outlying areas alike. His contribution forever altered the landscape and helped give birth to the preservation of the region's architectural history. Los Angeles was a city on the cusp of massive growth, and Kress' solutions were both practical and creative. "Kress was reinventing the process of house moving," Doran notes. "I was once told that the sewing machine was invented only when



George R. Kress in 1940, working a job in Palm Springs, California
George R. Kress Collection

someone figured out that you could put the hole at the other end of the needle. That is the way that George Kress thought. The move of the Commercial Exchange Building was the perfect example of this."

To Kemerer, Kress will always be larger than life. "A man who could move things on a rather superhuman scale, feats that a normal person could not even conceive of, had to have a remarkable image of himself," notes Kemerer. "Here was a man who could walk up to a big building or a house of any size and weight and say, 'Sure, I can move that; where do you want it?'" Yet Kress' image of himself was derived not from arrogance but from his proven capabilities and achievements.

Photographs of Kress show a man whose stance and expression exude bold self-assurance, as if he is daring anyone to doubt his abilities. His brochures boasted, "If we had room to work, we could move the world," and the impression is that George R. Kress believed he could deliver on that promise.