

'Make that Villa Immodesto,' says lady of charming manor

THE BRASS MONKEY begged to be let in this week as the season's chilliest winds blew autumn's last leaves into the neighbor's yard — thus freeing me to walk the Oak Bay waterfront.

Up Sylvan Lane past charming Owlswick; to Denison Road and baronial Kingsmont; down the 109 steps from Walbran Park to Beach Drive and along to Salty Towers — a grand edifice designed in 1913 by Belfast-educated architect William Wallace Blair.

Naming a home — is it an act of self-expression creating a bit of frivolous fancy? Or simply an affectation of WASP values carried over from a feudal past?

Whatever, these names are everywhere. Even Victoria's condos and townhouses — those Gyproc castles with pressboard peaks — are made magnificent with names such as Sterling Mews, Ashleigh Manor, Waterford Park.

Roger Harper of Dig This garden supply in Bastion Square takes about 50 orders a year for metal house-signs cost-



LON WOOD

ing roughly \$100 to \$500 each.

Pressing headlong into the numbing nor'easter, I continued my walk — past Salty Towers, toward the marina — when beyond the venerable Oak Bay Beach Hotel my attention was grabbed by an intriguing sign at 193 Beach.

The rectangular plaque sports four yellow primroses on a glossy black background — and raised white capitals proclaiming, "VILLA MODESTO (NOT)."

Who could resist? I knocked — and found gold behind the cast aluminum plate affixed to the housefront.

At the entrance to the 66-year-old tu-

dor-revival residence, Anne Northeast (no relation to the wind blowing me onto her doorstep) greeted me with a barking dog and the broadest Yorkshire accent, well, this side of Yorkshire.

"What fun!" she exclaimed when I explained my need for an example of how a home comes by its moniker.

Northeast and her dentist husband Nicholas completed a heroic restoration of the run-down tudor in May. The house — once slated for demolition to expand the Oak Bay Beach Hotel parking lot — was designed by architect Percy Leonard James, who with Francis Rattenbury designed Victoria's Crystal Garden, the main post office and the Canadian Pacific Steamship terminal now housing the wax museum.

The Villa Modesto (Not) tag? "Everything I own has a name," said Northeast. "My car was Stanley; my vacuum's Vera."

"These are my servants and I'm a crashing snob — lived in Rockland — love moving — had a go at the Uplands

— a bit too expensive. Lovely people, mind you — very pleasant — except you never see them. All you see is their gardens. And I do enjoy meeting people — and dogs — on the street.

"Not much use being a snob unless you have someone to do it with."

The renovation was costly, "but there were no horrible surprises. Harry Elsdon [the Oak Bay inspector] turned out to be not a bad bloke. And Rick Couvelier of Sherlock Homes gave it a real going over — no use living in a heap."

Now short of cash, Anne called Commonwealth Games offices and told them she wanted to rent the house out for next August's international event.

"They asked if I was interested in the Games and I said, 'Bloody hell, no! I want to make some money to pay for the back garden!'"

Northeast, a Tracey Ullman sound-alike, also runs an up-Island antique outlet called Big Chests and Little Cups.

"We had a hell of a time getting that

name past. They thought it was a lingerie shop — or something dirty."

The Northeasths have two children their mother refers to lovingly as, "Jumbo" and "The Cow" — but it was Colin the Moose who made the renovation "much more exciting than if we'd gone for a modern job full of toilets in Gordon Head."

The Northeasths bought the moose head at Kilshaw's auction house.

"Colin is a heavy-eyed fellow with a great long nose," said Anne. "He wouldn't fit through any of the doors — so we popped a hole in the roof, dropped him in, and rebuilt it."

What about that name plate — why not Costa Lotta or Casa del Visa?

"Friends suggested since ours is a modest version of Salty Towers, Villa Modesta would be appropriate. I said bugger it, I'm not a modest person. I always try to live beyond my means."

Modesto (Not) it is.