

Ontario

Geneva Area Contains Many Beautiful Cobblestone Homes

By ELSIE MEAD

HALL — Recent descriptions in the Times of some of the cobblestone houses in this area bring to mind an article which appeared back in 1917 in a well-gotten up, illustrated magazine, then popular.

The author of this entertaining and instructive article was Christina Livingston Rose, of the Geneva family of Roses. Her mind went into action, she said, on hearing the opinion of George Moore that "art is dead, killed about 1880 by ease of locomotion. Never again shall we have art, until segregation is restored."

"Why, that means our cobblestone houses," thought Christina Rose. "What more obvious example of art produced by a segregated people than this form of decorative veneer? Here are no bricks brought from England, but shingles from their own Lake Ontario.

Medina Sandstone

Explaining that the round, water-worn cobbles are Medina sandstone, varying in size and, inland, in color, the author goes on to recount her experiences as she investigated houses and other buildings of cobblestone, most of them not too far from Geneva.

She found, "three distinct styles in cobblestone houses — the Georgian, the Gothic and the Jigsaw. Examples of the last variety we find with the most elaborate details, replete with all the ugliness of a dying art. But always it is an ugliness full of the mysterious charm that we find so endearing in our ugly friends."

The article is beautifully illustrated, containing among others a picture of the unusual, and unusually large, house that used to dominate a crossroad near Billsboro. It was on the old Armstrong farm, owned in recent years by Mr. W. A. White and Miss Katherine White.

Peter Schuyler

Historian of the Town of Seneca, E. L. Bristol, links the house with Peter Schuyler, brother of the more famous Philip Schuyler of Albany. Peter Schuyler came to this section of country at the beginning of the 19th century.

He married, says Mr. Bristol, the daughter of Valentine Brother, one of the prominent founders of Number Nine Church. Peter Schuyler's grave is in the old Number Nine Cemetery.

The cobblestone house which burned about 25 years ago would befit the honored name of Schuyler. But let Christina Rose speak of its indefinable air, "all dignity and aloofness, exactly the kind of a house that ought to have produced a great statesman or a president."

The author of the 1917 article, in exploring cobblestone houses, did not fail of enjoyment in her interviews with the people concerned. She asked of one "native" why she had only once found the third generation living in an ancestral cobblestone dwelling.

"You never find a cobblestone house on poor land," was the reply. "Only rich farmers could afford them." The wise man went on to point out that the third generation on these good farms had made enough money to retire to town!

An old lady gave out the information that fireplaces were out of date by 1850 (ornamental mantels substituted).

Another woman admitted candidly, in regard to the origin of the cobblestones in her house, "Oh, they just picked 'em up off the place."

Field Stones

It is of course true that not all the cobblestone houses in our vicinity are faced with stones hauled from Lake Ontario. Some of them, as attractive as any to be found, are made of field stones, graded and set in place as meticulously as the more uniformly reddish lakeshore product.

For instance, this is the type of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Montford's where I had the privilege of calling last fall. It is a place I had often admired for its sturdy, homely look, tucked away on the Lake to Lake Rd., east of the Stanley-Gorham highway.

The Montfords are in love with their home, which they acquired around 10 years ago. Previously it had been owned by the Depew family, housing two generations of them. It was built by Joseph Hershey.

The only date found by the present owners, 1836, was on an old door on a separate building. That it had once been a part of the house appears probable, for it still bore the non-eradicable original paint, probably with a buttermilk base, which comes to light in scraping down the surface of any of the painted woodwork in the house.

The same color was used throughout.

The house consists of a two-story upright with an ell to the east. The cobblestones are pleasantly blended in color through ruddy brown to gray. As in many houses, less regular stones are found in the extension to the rear.

The lime masonry between the rows of stones goes back to the era before cement was used. It has been repainted but, Mr. Montford said, was not found in bad condition, probably no worse than a hundred years before.

"Masonry," explained my host, "usually deteriorates as much as it is going to, very soon, and then does not change very much."

Two Cellars

Between the two-story part of the house and the east wing, the stone wall runs to the ground, making two separate cellars. This seems to have been the usual procedure.

In this house, when the present occupants put in plumbing and had to make a drain through the outside cellar wall, it was found to be next to an impossibility to make a hole through.

Below the surface, the wall is at least five feet thick. Huge boulders were imbedded in it, split, with the flat side within.

The interior of the house is comfortably roomy for the Montford family of four — there are a son and a daughter, still in school at Gorham. In the one-story wing are two small bedrooms besides living room and dining room.

The west front room, designed as the parlor, with the more elaborate panelled woodwork, had a tiny "parlor bedroom" back of it. Removal of a partition has thrown this in with the old pantry.

Concessions to Comfort

Upstairs, I was told, are a bedroom, and the bathroom. This is one of the concessions to modern comfort which have been so managed, in the house, as not to detract from its early 19th century charm.

Doors with lengthwise panels

prevail, the thick walls making 20-inch wide sills between rooms. In the living room, a clock niche and a little cupboard above the cornice rail are features.

So are the windows of the parlor, with paneling to the floor and hand turned lintels. All the woodwork was deeply covered with paint, and has been kept painted. Many of the boards, probably pine, are of more than common width, without knots or other imperfections.

Some of the old iron door latches are fitted with an ingenious locking device — simple after it has been demonstrated, as were so many of the everyday inventions of American pioneers.

Kitchen Remodeling

On the day of my call on the Montfords, the kitchen was undergoing a remodeling. Obviously the change was for the better, even at the expense of a few minor antique details.

If there was any objection it might have come from the two family dogs snoozing on the floor, maintaining a "dogged" air of placidity while workmen and others walked over or around them.

The Montford home is congenial to pets, anyone could see that. A small crisis had arisen just as this reporter arrived. The parakeet, whose cage door stands open, had disappeared somewhere in the house.

This was not too unusual or alarming, except that the cat also was on the loose and could have been overcome by temptation. "Budgie," was the parakeet, who eventually turned up without a ruffled feather.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Montford are busy people. His job keeps him on the road all day, and Mrs. Montford is a substitute teacher.

Their cordiality in showing and discussing their prized example of indigenous "art" enhances the pleasure of seeing it.