

COBBLESTONE CONNOISSEUR



Carl F. Schmidt not only tracks down cobblestone houses but also learns precisely how wide apart the stones in them are placed and

what size they are. At left he takes measurements. Above is the Abel house, West Henrietta, one of the many which he has sketched.

By Edmund W. Peters

STONY is the road that Carl F. Schmidt travels.

Schmidt is a house hunter. Let that eager gleam come from your eyes, you real estate men; put away that document with the dotted line, and drop that sales manual. Schmidt is looking for cobblestone houses, but not to buy or rent. He's an architect.

The introductory sentence sounds as though his path is bestrewn with obstacles. But it is not. Finding cobblestone houses is easy if you know where to look. You can travel every highway, lane and cowpath between Buffalo and San Francisco, and Binghamton and Key West, Fla., without being startled by anything that even resembles one.

But look between Utica and Buffalo and you'll find it different. You'll see relatively so many, you'll have spots shaped like cobblestones dancing before your eyes.

Architect Schmidt probably would disclaim being an authority on these houses. But 10 years of interest in them and two of spending almost every free Saturday afternoon in looking up those he has heard about, making microscopic measurements of their proportions and sketches of their exteriors should make him first cousin to an authority.

Schmidt has "been around," in this country and abroad. Take it from him: in the area bounded roughly by Utica and Buffalo, and Lake Ontario and an imaginary line running 40 or 50 miles south of it are found the only cobblestone houses in the world. Rochester has two of them, one at East Main Street and Culver Road, and the other a few blocks below Main, on Culver. Irondequoit has two and Greece a few more.

Furthermore, this area is likely to retain its distinction as the only locale for this type of residence. The cobblestone houses were built only in the period between 1830 and 1850. That they still stand today is evidence of how well they were constructed.

How does a cobblestone-house-hunter go about his avocation? "Well," says Schmidt, as sturdy an individual as the residences he seeks, "you have to do a lot of asking." Residents in one of these homes, he pointed out, usually know when someone else in the neigh-

borhood lives in one of the same type.

Armed with drawing paper, measuring instruments and camera and color film, Schmidt scours the countryside whenever he finds a Saturday free from other duties. "It usually takes a whole afternoon to examine one house," he explains. As a result of his jaunts, he has accumulated a large number of sketches and a box full of mounted color film which he can project on a screen.

Besides those in the immediate vicinity, he has discovered cobblestone houses in Scottsville, Mendon, Canandaigua, Pultneyville, Henrietta and a

cobblestone church in Webster. It was in Victor, however, that he attained the closest communication with the long-dead past.

For some time, while he had been making minute measurements of one residence, a bystander had been watching him curiously. Unable to restrain himself any longer, the onlooker finally walked up and asked Schmidt what he was doing.

"Say," he said, when Schmidt explained, "There's an old fellow living around the corner used to build these houses. I'll bet he can tell you a lot about 'em."



Above is another of the sketches, drawn at the end of a successful quest by Schmidt. Showing part of the Isaac Chase house in Parma, it depicts one of the residences found nowhere except in a limited area in New York

Schmidt looked the man up. He discovered that while the octogenarian he found really hadn't built any cobblestone houses he had helped in repairs many years before. Furthermore, he had worked with men long since dead, who originally had built the homes. He knew the infinite pains and care they required in their construction.

For example, the octogenarian explained, an old-time mason, working the 10 or 12-hour day then in vogue, probably would lay three rows of cobblestones for one wall of a dwelling. Looking back upon a day of back-breaking toil, he would discover he had raised a wall just 9 inches high!

"Imagine," says Schmidt, "today's masons, working at today's wages, and what it would cost to build such a home. Or try to imagine a modern mason knocking off in the middle of the day to look for more material when he ran out of the stones."

The number of stones that went into these residences must be staggering, Schmidt declares. Behind the deceptive outer walls of the houses he has examined, he usually has found about 14 inches of cobblestones laid in parallel rows. "Probably it would take 150 loads of stone for the construction of one house."

Backing up his estimate is what the owner of one such home told him. From records kept by his ancestors he had learned the story of how the residence he dwelt in, on the Geneva-Canandaigua highway, had been built.

The original owner, his ancestor, was a farmer. He made periodic trips to Sodus, hauling wheat by ox team. On his way back he invariably loaded up with cobblestones. It took him three years to accumulate enough material—and three more years to build his residence!

The dwellings, Schmidt finds, were constructed of two types of stone. One was a smooth, oval or round lake-washed stone and the other a semi-smooth, often squarish or rectangular field stone, dating back to the glacial age. Curiously, many residences near the lake are built of field stone, and others as far from its waters as 30 miles were built of lake stone. The inference is that the owners were willing to haul the cobblestones long distances to get precisely what they wanted.

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The masons, too, were particular about their work, Schmidt learned. They took care to vary designs, using stones of different colors, sizes and kinds. They built with different types of joints to eliminate the possibility of monotony.

Speculating on the origin of cobblestone houses, Schmidt thinks that when settlers first came here the ground must have been covered with stones left by the receding ice sheet of the glacial period. As pioneers cleared the land for cultivation, they used them to build foundations for their homes and barns and to build fences. "Then," he reasons, "some thoughtful builder or mason came along and asked: 'Why not build an entire house of these small stones?'"

The insecurity of the Civil War period, he believes, made it impossible to

continue the building of these houses. With the financial structure of the nation shaky, it was a brave man who would think of investing any large amount of money in a residence for himself.

The only buildings Schmidt ever saw bearing any resemblance to the dwellings in this area he encountered in Normandy, France. There, he remembers, they were constructed in the main of dressed stone with panels of small stones, resembling cobblestones, to vary the monotony of large, plain areas.

To Schmidt the excursions about the countryside represent a hobby, not without its practical side. The information he gathers, for instance, he intends to turn over to universities and libraries when he has compiled it into coherent form.

Right now he has a dozen homes on his list, all of which he intends to visit when he has the time. Between Utica and Buffalo, he estimates, there are anywhere from 125 to 150 homes. Eventually he may get around to all of them, because he hasn't any intention of abandoning his jaunts.

Interested in all sorts of architecture, he has been engaged for a quarter-century in close examination of homes all over the country. The majority of owners, he has learned, are pleased and gratified that anyone should be interested in their abode; many of them, living in a residence as unusual as a cobblestone home take a pride in it and seek to find out all they can about it. "A few—a very few—don't know the difference and don't care."

He's been "thrown out" of only two

homes, one in Annapolis and one in Philadelphia. That's a pretty fair batting average, he thinks, for 25 years of approaching strangers for permission to intrude on their privacy.

Schmidt made his debut recently as a lecturer, speaking before the Rochester Historical Society at the Lake Avenue museum. His topic, of course, had to do with cobblestone houses. "It's fun," he says of lecturing.

He claims the men who constructed the cobblestone homes of more than a century ago, were "modern" builders. "They represented a modernistic movement of their time. They used the material of a particular locality and developed a type of construction suitable to the material and to the labor and machine conditions of the time."