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SUN SPOTS

By Lilah Henry



A HOUSE ON THE RIDGE

He who loves an old house never loves in vain,
How can an old house used to sun and rain,
To lilac and larkspur and elm above,
Ever fail to answer the heart that gives it love?

—From Conant's 'Old House'

For 113 years now the old house has watched with placid contentment the comings and goings of men along The Ridge. Lilac bushes standing on tiptoe now peek shyly into the upstairs windows, and creeping woodbine run exploring fingers diagonally up its walls. Giant sugar maples bend in whispered confidences above its rooftop and lilies-of-the-valley nestle close to its feet.

Giant snowball bushes standing off a bit in the yard, as if to get a better perspective of the rows and rows of smooth round lake stones which form its sturdy walls, nodded approving heads as I too, took up a stance on the lawn to get a better view of the old house.

A woody scent mingled with the fragrance of old fashioned peonies drifted past me from the back of the house. As I walked back past the weigela bushes, the remnants of a former garden came into view. Here were old fashioned shrub roses with bursting buds, iris clumps and browning daffodil spikes tangled with weeds beneath the branches of a flowering quince. Here must have been a path which led down through the flower garden to the lower end where now luscious, untrimmed forsythia bushes crowded their branches into the faces of the surrounding vegetation.

I HALF EXPECTED to see English bred Ann Britton and her aristocratic farmer husband, Richard Britton, (who built this house on The Ridge west of Williamson) come around the side of the house and join me in the garden. They had come from Yorkshire, England in 1831 to settle on this farm and live in a log cabin for eight years, while the land was being cleared. In fact they landed in Putneyville just 121 years ago this month after a seven weeks voyage across the Atlantic.

Richard was a veterinary surgeon as well as a farmer and a Republican, and after a time the town poor-master. And so, befitting a man of his station, he built a magnificent cobblestone dwelling, in the year of 1839. Ann and Richard by that time had two sons and a daughter.

The second son Joseph who was born in 1833, grew up, married and stayed on at the old homestead. Two frame sections were added to the original cobblestone house as the years went by. The wooden section to the west is still there to-

day, but the east wing has been moved down the road to the east a short distance and used as the basis of what is now the tenant house on the farm.

Joseph, who in his younger days attended Sodus Academy, was also a Republican and a Town Assessor for ten years. On October 27, 1864 he married Elizabeth Clark of Ontario and to them was born one daughter, whom they named Carrie.

Carrie, who was born and lived and died in the old Britton house, married a Watertown merchant by the name of Elmer V. Santee. Thus it came about after the death of Carrie's father, Joseph, in 1900, the old homestead was occupied by tenant farmers for about seven years, since there was no male heir to carry on the operation of the farm.

After her marriage Carrie lived in Watertown for a time and her mother left the old homestead to live with Carrie. However the tie which bound them to the old cobblestone house must have been really strong because Carrie and her family used to spend their Summers in the house, using the downstairs rooms of the cobblestone part of the house, while the tenant farmers occupied the wooden west wing and the second floor of the stone part.

Finally seven years after the turn of the century the Santee family came back to the farm to live and Carrie's husband Elmer took over the operation of the farm. He developed several acres of fruit on the farm and began raising chickens and shipping eggs to New York City.

The Santees had one son Howard, who was a Freshman in high school the year his family moved back to the old Britton homestead. Years later at the death of his parents, Howard fell heir to the farm house and the land. In 1947, he offered it for sale. At that time the Cobblestone house had been in the possession of the same family for 108 years.

TWO ROBINS dashed past me to scold and jump at each other on the lawn beyond the flowering quince tree and a frightened baby bunny fled with lightning bounds into the tall grass of the orchard beyond the flower garden. Someone

spoke my name and I turned to see Lauretta Knapp coming through the deep doorway at the back of the old cobblestone house.

"It was nice of you to stop in," she said. "Just a minute while I get the baby settled out here in the sunshine," and with characteristic efficiency she scooped up the youngster under one arm and grasping the handle bars of a tricycle with the other hand that already held a coil of rope, transported them all swiftly to a sunny spot on the lawn.

Depositing them on the grass she snapped one end of the rope to the harness the baby wore, uncoiled the rope and thrust the long spike-like blade attached to the other end of the rope into the ground and pushed it into the earth to the hilt with her foot. The swivel at the upper end of the blade allowed the youngster to wander over a large circular area, which kept him contented while Lauretta showed me around.

As we walked toward the house she told me that she and her husband, John, bought the old house last March, and that they plan to build a terrace at the east and north sides of the house next year and turn the old woodshed, with its L shaped area into a Summer house with a picnic table and chairs for lounging.

GOING INTO THE main part of the house through the back door leading from the proposed terrace, we followed a hall into the room the Knapps have transformed into an early American kitchen.

In years past this room was used as a dining room. Its hardwood floor made of extremely narrow strips of wood shone with the high gloss of the gym seal which had been applied to it. It looked so virginal that I hesitated to step on it, but Lauretta assured me that it was very simple to keep clean.

The furnishings were early American pine very much in keeping with the provincial wall paper recently applied. There was a century old Dutch cupboard, hand made of pine and put together with pegs. Holes along the front edges of some of the shelves showed where some pioneer housewife must have hung her table silver.

An ancient pine dry-sink, which she discovered in the woodshed, Lauretta has had refinished, placed in front of one of the kitchen windows, and a stainless steel sink installed in it. Now she is looking for another just like it to refinish and use as the base for a stainless steel stove with a detached oven, which she will have installed in another spot in the kitchen.

A pine coat rack dating back to the 1700s, Lauretta has refinished and fastened to the wall near her stove. From its numerous pegs she suspended her copper pots and pans by means of a rawhide loop in each handle.

JUST OFF the kitchen is a "pantry" and another little room which the Knapps have transferred into a play room for the children. There is a low row of hooks where the older son and his playmates can hang their clothes and a lavatory just the right height for the small fry to wash dirty hands.

This room was formerly the kitchen, Lauretta explained. In it she found a small table with two narrow leaves, oil cloth covered and besmired with a sticky black substance which had dripped from the chimney above it. Investigation revealed the fact that the sticky stuff was honey which had dripped out when a swarm of bees had used the chimney for a beehive. The honey mixed with the soot had covered the little table.

After the strange mixture had been cleaned up Lauretta discovered that the table was a Hepplewhite and guessed that it must have been brought to America from England by the first Ann and Richard Britton back in 1831. At any rate the little table with its graceful leaves will have a place of honor in the Knapp's living room, when it has been refinished.

The Knapp's dining room was once the entrance hall in the west wing of the house. Its floor is covered with the same narrow strips of hard wood that make up the kitchen floor. The walls have been papered with an early American wall paper called "Pride's Crossing." A companion fabric will be used as curtains at the upper half of the windows above the little pine shutters, which Lauretta is having installed in the lower half of all the windows in the dining room, the living room and the den.

THE LIVING ROOM is in the cobblestone part of the house. It is reached through a deep doorway opening from the dining room. Here the long wall opposite the windows with their deep window ledges, has been covered with a most unusual hand blocked scenic paper depicting a rural scene, in tones of shocking pink, lime green and accents of red on a chocolate background.

The paper shows a hundred year old house, farm buildings, a field of corn shocks, cows, horses, a pond and a fisherman and a sail boat, a red silo, a cart with red wheels and a man with a red jacket all in very diminutive sizes. There are tall Lombardy poplars in two colors and many other details which a person does not see at first glance, all executed by the artist in a modern technique.

The woodwork of the living room has been painted chocolate to match the background of the scenic paper and the ceiling of the room the shocking pink of some of the figures in the paper. The effect is both arresting and satisfying since the other three walls of the room are covered with plain chocolate wall paper.

From the center of the ceiling a black punched tin lantern designed many years ago to hold a candle, and now electrified, hangs in solemn dignity and when lighted showers dots of lights over the ceiling and upper side walls.

Lauretta told me about an old spool couch, which she is in the process of upholstering in shocking pink nylon, to be silhouetted against the scenic wall paper.

OPENING OFF THE living room is a downstairs bedroom, which the Knapps are using for a den and TV room. Across the east wall of the room stretches a fireplace with a shallow cupboard above one end of the mantel and a full length cupboard at the end of the fireplace.

Lauretta told me that the fireplace had been sealed up, but that they had opened it and were planning to use it. They had already installed a brass fender and have since placed a gas log in the opening. A brass kettle handed down through John's family was most effective at the side of the hearth.

SUN SPOTS—Continued
A flat heat pipe running up the opposite wall of the room Lauretta plans to conceal with a row of book shelves. A door from this room leads directly outdoors to the side lawn. This is the door that in earlier days led into the east frame wing, before it was removed to help make the tenant house. Next Summer it will give most convenient access to the side terrace to be constructed to the east of the house. There are five other outside doors in the house beside this one.

There is also a bathroom on the main floor with a deep window over looking the back lawn. The stairs to the second floor of the cobblestone part open off the present dining room, and can be reached also from the back hall by means of a quaint little half door reminiscent of the door to a ships cabin over whose high threshold a person must lift his feet to enter.

LAURETTA AND JOHN are very much in love with the old cobblestone house, its wide window ledges, its hand hewn beams, fast-

ened with pegs, and its flag stone basement floor. They are putting much time and thought into the restoring of the interior of the house and the furnishing of it in the right spirit.

Attention is being given to small details. Instead of a cardboard box or basket for the children's toys, there's an old time 20 inch wooden butter bowl in the tiny alcove off the kitchen in which the current toys are piled. There's an old fashioned crockery cookie jar and old time canisters for coffee and sugar in the kitchen, and two matching blue coffee pots of another generation on the pantry shelves.

In the living room is a dainty slate back rocker which Lauretta's paternal grandfather, Thomas Sheahan, bought for his wife when they settled in their first home in Williamson on the Ridge Chapel Road after coming to this area from Canada in 1838.

As they go about restoring the interior of their 113 year old house, the Knapps often have the feeling that some one who has cared deeply for the old place is looking over their shoulders. As they clear the tangled weeds from the garden paths and discover perennials and flower bulbs and shrubs planted long ago by loving hands they often have the feeling that Carrie Santee and perhaps her father Joseph Britton are watching and encouraging them. The Knapps look at the towering trees extending protective arms about the old house, and wonder if Richard and Ann Britton of England did not set out these trees, the year they built the cobblestone house.

SINCE VISITING the old cobblestone house and seeing what the Knapps are doing to restore it, I sent a note off to Howard Santee who lives in New York City asking him to verify the date the house was built and similar facts. Thus for many of the historical facts mentioned above I am indebted to Howard who answered immediately and at length. (It was Howard's great grandfather, of course, who built the house.)

To quote from the closing paragraphs of his letter: "In 1907 we moved back to the farm . . . and occupied the whole house, as it is now, after making some alterations. For example, in what we used for a dining room there was a tiny bedroom in addition to the dining space, which we tore out to make one large room. This little downstairs bedroom was so small that special furniture had to be made to fit. (We still have the miniature "commode," marble topped, which we find just right as a bedside table between our twin beds in the apartment.)"

He went on to say, "If there are other details you need to know, please don't hesitate to ask about them, and I'll do my best to answer," and then very generously added at the bottom, "Incidentally the main reason we still subscribe to The Sun is to be able to read your Sun Spots."

Thanks. Howard. It's nice to know that a busy executive, takes time out to read the home town paper!

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