

IT'S A CHALLENGE

ALBION FAMILY RESTORING 140-YEAR-OLD COBBLESTONE



Dianne Conroy finds the cobblestone the perfect backdrop for refinished furniture.

By PAULA VOELL

HEN THOMAS and Dianne Conroy moved from Rochester to the Albion area, they abandoned their city ways. "When you live in the city, if you need something done like painting or wallpapering, you call someone in to do it," said Mrs. Conroy, "but in the country everyone does these things themselves."

That fit the Conroys' plans perfectly because they knew that to afford the house they wanted, they'd have to become prime "do-it-yourselfers." And they have. They've stripped floors, built tables, pulled plaster from a ceiling, painted and papered.

Mainly, their efforts have focused on restoration, rather than remodeling, of their 140-year-old cobblestone to retain the inherent character of the structure, built when cobblestone architecture was in its heyday in New York state. Of the 1,000 estimated cobblestones in this country, 90 percent are said to be within a 75-mile radius of Rochester.

In the 12 years the Conroys have owned their cobblestone, they've found that the houses attract a lot of attention. Photographers are likely to stop and shoot; artists come by to sketch the exterior and they are asked to be on house tours.

"I always wanted to live in a brick house," Mrs. Conroy said. "Now I've found out that cobblestones are better."

One challenge of living in a cobblestone is keeping the exterior in good repair. Masons guarded their building secrets jealously and the proper mix of lime and sand mortar can't always be duplicated.

A mason worked on more than one cobblestone at a time because the mortar set slowly and only a few courses could be laid each day. One mason described the process this way: "Putting a stone in the mortar is like setting a chocolate chip in icing."

While the masons built on the Ontario plain, roughly between 1825 to 1865, children helped by collecting stones from the Erie Canal construction completed in 1825 and from its widening 10 years later.

Careful craftsmanship continues to the interior of the Conroy house where wide plank floors have been exposed and rubbed with linseed oil and the beauty of 16-inch-deep windowsills is shown off with plants, oil lamps and other collectibles.

Among the furnishings are a canopy bed covered with a Cathedral Square quilt which Mrs. Conroy worked on for six years. And

the house contains chairs purchased for \$1 or \$2 because the seats were broken. Mrs. Conroy learned to do caning and replace rush seating from J. Howard Pratt, a neighbor who is in his 90s and taught himself both crafts within the last 10 years, another example of country inventiveness.

The couple, married 24 years, left Rochester, where Mr. Conroy still works, for the serenity of the country when they started their family. Though the Conroys had been told they couldn't have children and their first son wasn't born until they had been married nine years, they proved the doctors wrong five times. They are parents of Thomas, 15; Sean, 11; Kevin, 9; Patrick, 8; and Christopher, 6; all of whom are soccer and karate champs.

The floor plan of the house, a duplicate to a center entrance colonial, pleases Mrs. Conroy because it gives the family plenty of space and offers privacy as well.

Particularly distinctive because of its herringbone stone pattern, the house is 2½ stories rather than the more typical 1½ stories.

The Conroys have found that despite their thick walls, cobblestone houses can be tricky to heat, especially when the winds blow.

"The house is cool in the summer and it's cool in the winter," said Mrs. Conroy.

But any disadvantage they may have found in cobblestone life has been overwhelmingly compensated in advantages.

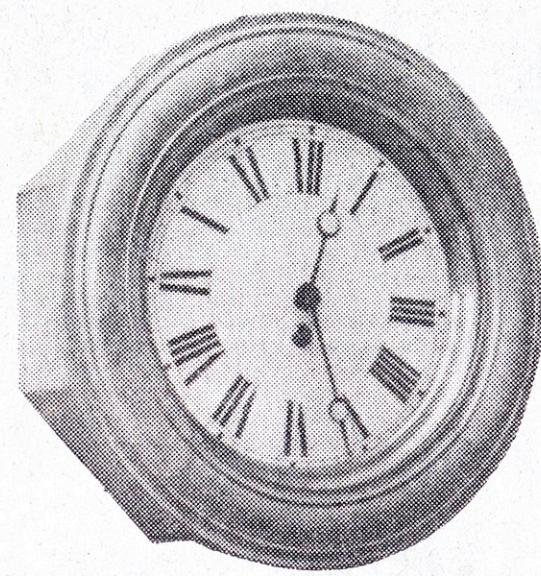
"I wanted a house for less than \$30,000 that we could fix up ourselves," Mrs. Conroy explained, "and we got it."

They tackled refurbishing jobs in the living room and dining room first and have been making their way through the house.

Furniture from auctions, garage sales and purchases from neighbors who know they ap-



Deep windowsills allow Dianne Conroy a chance to show off her collections. At right, one of the clocks that has become an annual Christmas gift.



Cobblestone houses like the Conroys' along Route 104 are attention-getters.

preciate older pieces, combine to give the house the look of something from the pages of Country Living.

The dining room holds a spinning wheel, a yarn winder and a duck decoy sitting in a basket as a table centerpiece. The living room has a baby grand piano, a doughbox table Mr. Conroy made and many reminders of yesteryear.

Even in the downstairs bathroom, a recent project, the feeling of earlier times prevails with details such as tongue and groove paneling, a washboard and one of the antique clocks that has become a traditional Christmas gift to Mrs. Conroy from her husband.

Along with the transformation of the interior of the house, the Conroys say they've

changed. "Prior to living here, we were so formal," said Mrs. Conroy, a former school teacher and legal secretary, "but this setting is very informal. As a matter of fact, we have a friend who feels so comfortable here, he falls asleep when he comes to visit."

The peaceful and welcoming atmosphere is exactly the environment this hard working family wanted to create.

For further information on cobblestones, visit the Cobblestone Museum in Chillicothe, about 27 miles west of Rochester on Route 104. Along the way you'll see many examples of this form of architecture. The museum is open from 1 to 5 p.m. today and next Sunday. A donation of \$1 (50 cents for students) is requested.



The living room could be a scene from a country living magazine.