

Remnants of Ice Age Survive In WNY's Cobblestone Homes

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A **BELLY** (or as it's also called, an eyebrow) isn't part of the human body to a fancier of cobblestone houses. Instead, it's a small, oblong window just under the eaves and it gets its name from the fact that you have to get down on your belly on the attic floor to see out.

Cobblestone houses are a rarity in most of the United States but not for Western New Yorkers. Of the 600-odd cobblestones still standing in the country, authorities said, some 500 are in New York State and most of those are in the four Lake Ontario counties of Niagara, Orleans, Monroe and Wayne, stretching from Youngstown to east of Rochester.

Wayne County has the most — 200. There are 50 or so in Niagara County.

COBBLESTONES were formed after the last Ice Age when the huge glaciers covering the northern part of the continent melted away, leaving in their wake the Great Lakes. The lakes — still the world's largest body of fresh water — were even larger then. Along Lake Ontario, as it's southern shoreline receded from what is now the Niagara Escarpment to its present configuration, thousands of years of wave action produced countless smooth, rounded cobblestones.

When the pioneer farmers of the early 19th century plowed their fields, they were mighty disturbed by the cobblestones. They gathered them up and

put them in piles that dotted the landscape of the Ontario Plain.

Then, the masons who had worked on the building of the Erie Barge Canal were out of work when the canal was completed. It was at this time — starting about 1830 — that they went to work building cobblestone homes that could take three or four years to build, giving birth to a new architecture.

MOST cobblestone houses in the area were built in the next 30 years, according to such authorities as Olaf William Shergren Jr., Cary Lattin and Robert Frash who compiled "Cobblestone Landmarks of New York State," a paperback published last year by Syracuse University Press (\$7.95) with photography by Peter Rich.

Mr. Shergren, a Buffalo architect, is a trustee of the Landmark Society of the Niagara Frontier and a past president and current recording secretary of the Cobblestone Society, founded in 1960.

Mr. Lattin is a retired Orleans County historian, and founder of the Cobblestone Society. He lives in a cobblestone home, himself, in Childs, a hamlet just north of Albion. Mr. Frash is a director of the School of Science and Man at the Rochester Museum and Science Center. He was president of the society from 1960-66.

THE 19th ANNUAL Cobblestone Society Tour of Homes was held last month but there will be another next June.

But you don't have to wait for the tour. There are a dozen or so cobblestone houses to be viewed from roadside in the Wilson area of Niagara County a short drive from Buffalo.

One of the homes is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Clare G. Ross of Maple Road, Wilson. The structure, five years in the building, was completed in 1840 for one James Morse. The Rosses bought the house along with 10 acres of land, five years ago.

Mr. Ross, a vice president and director of marketing at Cannon Design on Grand Island, is also a gentleman farmer. "My wife, Pat, and our children, Duncan, 17, David, 15 and Cynthia 13, all help," he said.

THE BELLY or eyebrow window is typical of a cobblestone Greek "revival homes. It usually is about 20 x 30 inches and often embellished with grillwork of wood or metal," Mr. Ross explained.

The walls of these homes were usually 18 inches or more thick. The smaller, most attractive stones, as a rule, were used for the fronts of the houses. The slightly larger stones were used for the sides. The rear of the house often was veneered and finished with fieldstones.

The finest stones are uniform and look like an ostrich egg or large potato 2½ inches wide and 8 inches long. "When the stone is placed into the mortar properly," Mr. Ross said, "you only see about one third of it."

Cut limestone was used for

slabs above windows and doors and for cornerstones.

WHEN THE Rosses were remodeling the kitchen they ripped out a false ceiling to create a cathedral look and discovered an unfinished loft where they found two handmade quilts more than 100 years old. They also discovered the works of a grandfather's clock.

Because the house was vacant for a while before the Rosses bought it, many of the fixtures had been removed. They were fortunate, though. When the home of Frank Wisbaum, a Niagara Falls attorney, was condemned to make way for the Falls Convention Center, he sold them a pile of old brass light fixtures and chandeliers for "the fantastic sum of \$150."

A handsome fixture with sculptured brass monks and frosted crystal and etched globes now enhances the front hall. Another, with several globes and brass leaf motif, hangs in the center hall, and a crystal chandelier with French-cut prisms decorates the dining area.

SOME OF the original flooring survives and has been sanded and repaired and refinished. Much of the wood in the house is cucumber and hickory. The stairway is solid cherry, and many of the painted baseboards are walnut.

"THERE HAVE been only a few families who have lived in this fine old homestead," Mrs. Ross said as she pointed out how little had been disturbed in modernizing the interior.

"A first-floor bathroom had been built in the original pantry adjacent to the 10x10 kitchen. We opened all that up and relocated the bath to another corner, taking a chunk off the



Cynthia Ross descends circular staircase

... brass chandelier shown

original dining room," said Mr. Ross.

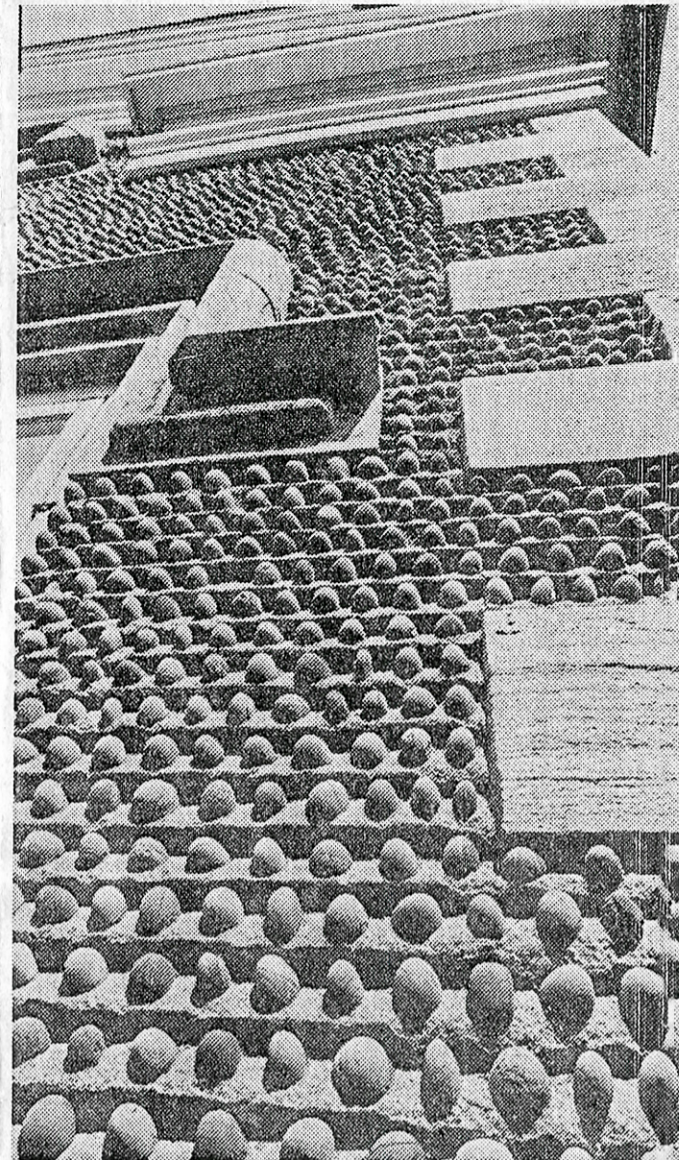
By tearing down a partition into the woodshed, off the kitchen, the Rosses were able to more than double their kitchen and preserve an inner-outer cobblestone wall. The new family room-kitchen now has a potbelly wood and coal stove.

The Rosses also have an airtight Scandinavian stove in their living room as a backup for their oil heating system. When they removed a retaining wall in this room, they installed two 150-year-old wood

angle supports from a barn across the road.

The home has many doorways to the outside, including one from the living room, one from the hall and dining area, one side entrance and two kitchen openings.

A keg of square nails was discovered when the Rosses opened a wall to install plumbing pipes to the second floor. Apparently a carpenter who had enclosed a stairwell "boxed in" the keg. When he realized he couldn't get it through the studs he just left it there.



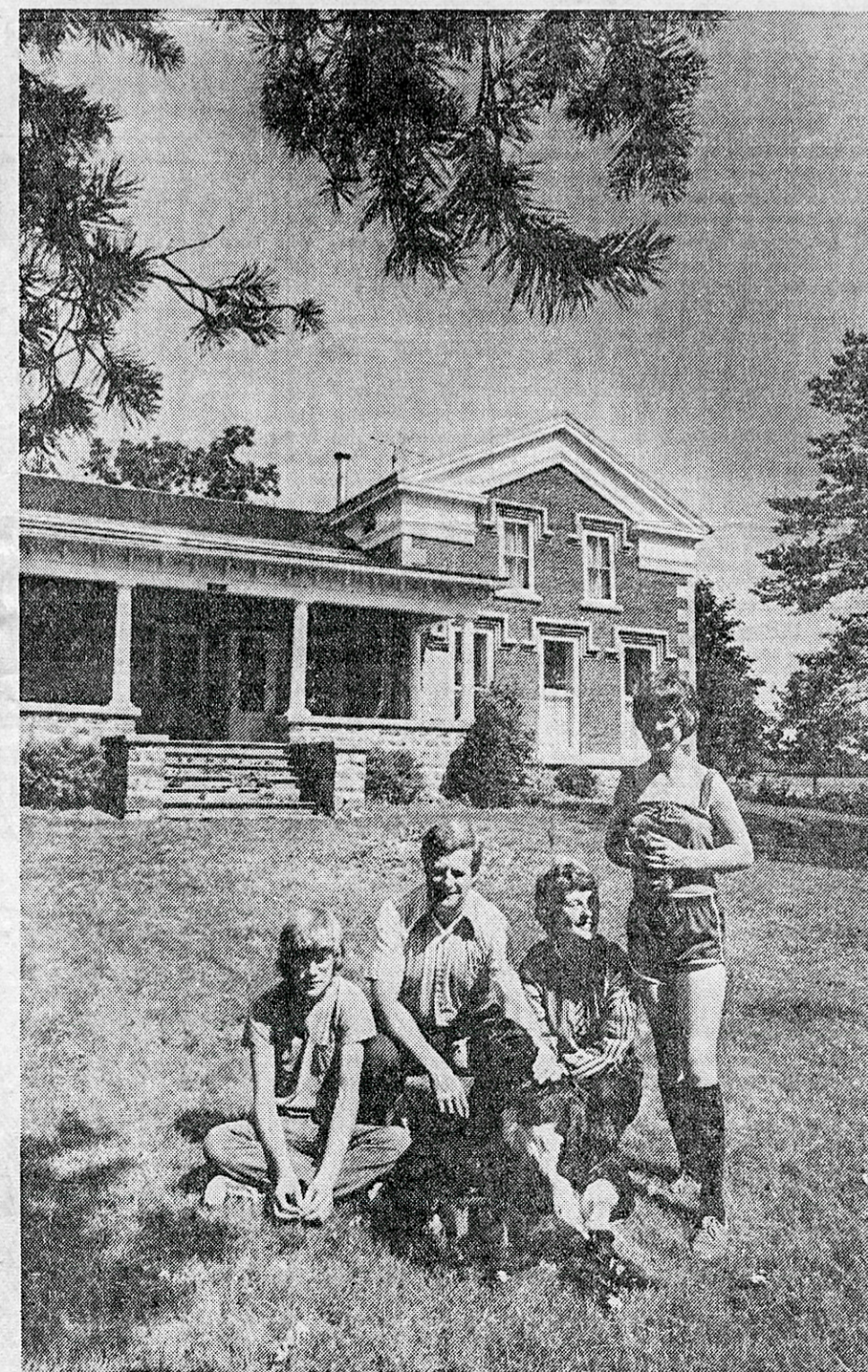
Close-up view of home's cobblestone wall

... quoins, or corners, are cut limestone

THE ROSSES plan to rebuild a cobblestone-and-field stone storehouse nearby. They already have repaired a stone barn that now houses their Arab palomino horse Cathreen.

The Rosses grow alfalfa on

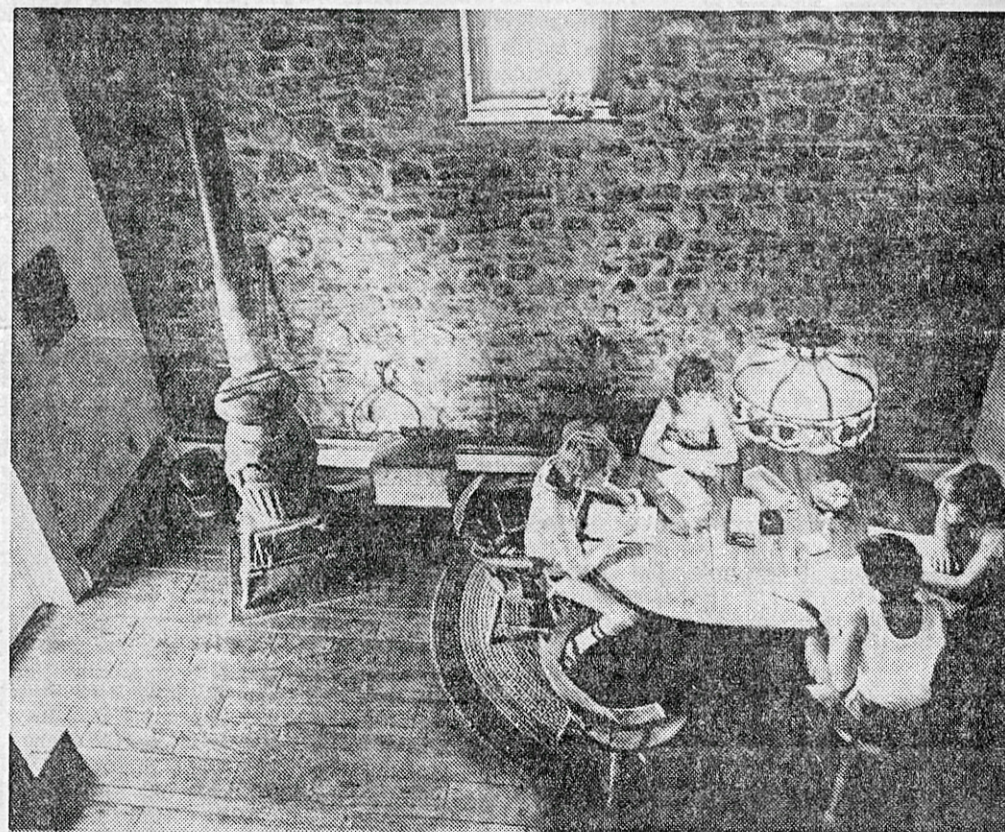
four acres and have a couple of acres of strawberries which they sell. They also are "foster parents" for the Niagara County Save-a-Pet program. Foster parents take care of stray pets until an owner is found.



David Mr. Ross Mrs. Ross Cynthia Ross

Clare Ross family and pets relax at Wilson home

... a Greek Revival cobblestone built in 1835-40



David Ross Cynthia Ross Kim West Tom Keefer

Teen-agers play word game in family room area of kitchen

... former woodshed of home now features potbelly stove

COURIER-EXPRESS PHOTOS/JOE TRAYER