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Saving the Past for the Future

Anonymous

James H. Karales

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A visit to Lake Forest, Illinois is an experience that rivals Alice's journey through the looking glass. Compared to the modern skyscrapers and bustling streets of downtown Chicago, just thirty miles away, the ambience of this little suburb is almost otherworldly. Narrow, winding lanes, illuminated by old-fashioned gas street lamps, curve through wooded bluffs and bridge deep ravines. And along these rustic streets stand scores of palatial mansions, built mostly in the early 1900s by such American architects as David Adler, Henry Ives Cobb and Howard Van Doren Shaw.

These elegant manors, like the many other historic structures of Lake Forest, are significant vestiges of the city's turn-of-the-century heyday. Their unique styles and architectural features are virtually inimitable now. Yet, like Alice's wonderland, the fabulous buildings of Lake Forest may some day exist only in the pages of books — and in the memories of those who were fortunate enough to have seen them for themselves.

Gayle Dompke, wife of Chicago director Richard E. Dompke, and president of the Lake Forest Foundation for Historic Preservation which she organized three years ago, believes that much of the historic architecture of the city is significant enough to warrant its preservation for the enjoyment of present and future generations. Gayle is dedicating her time and utmost efforts toward the achievement of this goal.

Bordered to the north and south by highly developed suburbs of Chicago's North Shore, Lake Forest is, in fact, an anachronism. Its atmosphere compels the mind to wander backward into a bygone era — an era in which the superwealthy of Chicago and the Midwest created a haven of luxury there by the picturesque shores of Lake Michigan. During the high-rolling years before the Great Depression, the whirlwind social schedules and Gatsby-like parties of Lake Forest's lords and ladies of the manors drew the attention of all the world. Although such carefree extravagance has been largely abandoned in modern times, the city remains as the legacy of a truly golden age — the like of which this country may never see again.

Though few would deny the cultural value of preserving Lake Forest's irreplaceable architecture and landscapes, a practical question arises: who can afford it? For the overwhelming majority of our society, the cost of buying — and particularly maintaining — a fifty-room mansion is clearly prohibitive. Thousand-dollar monthly heating bills and ten-thousand-dollar yearly grounds-maintenance bills are not unusual among Lake Forest estate owners, and the amounts paid in property taxes are enough to boggle the mind. Yet even among those who are fortunate enough to be able to absorb the financial responsibilities of such a property, a secondary query arises: who needs it?
This stately stone mansion in Lake Forest was originally designed as a summer residence for Edward L. Ryerson, the steel magnate. Used for almost forty years as a training center for Franciscan priests, the fifty-room house currently stands empty on its thirty-acre grounds.
Enjoying the fountain in Lake Forest’s quaint Market Square are officers of the Lake Forest Foundation for Historic Preservation (l. to r.) Lorraine Tweed, vice president; Gail Hodges, treasurer and foundation president Gayle Dompke. Designed in 1916 by architect Howard Van Doren Shaw, Market Square is thought to be the country’s very first shopping center.

According to Gayle and her colleagues, everybody needs it. From Lake Forest’s 15,000 residents, who prize the unique beauty of their community, to the country’s 215 million other citizens — no one can afford to let such valuable and irreplaceable monuments to the history of American architecture be wantonly laid to waste.

Both Gayle and Dick Dompke have been involved in the cause of historical preservation since their move to Lake Forest seven years ago. (The Dompkes’ arrival coincided with that of Charlie and Shirley Steele, who lived in that city from 1972 to 1976 while Charlie was serving as PIC of the Chicago office.) Gayle and Shirley’s interest in Lake Forest’s picturesque character prompted them to join the board of directors of the Lake Forest Historical Society, where Gayle began a project to gather and catalogue historical information on the many noteworthy estates in Lake Forest. Before long she received a call from Edward H. Bennett Jr., a member of one of the long-established families in the area, asking if he could assist her in her work.

As the project progressed, Gayle and Ted Bennett became increasingly aware that many of these fine old buildings would be threatened with destruction before too long because of the financial burdens of maintaining them. Concerned about the probable loss of this matchless architecture, they, along with other members of the society’s historic sites committee, met with Dr. Paul E. Sprague, an architectural historian and preservation consultant who was recommended to them by Dr. Sprague’s visitation. The separate organization was established for the sole purpose of preserving the visual character of Lake Forest. And so, in August of 1976, the Lake Forest Foundation for Historic Preservation was formally organized under a charter granted by the State of Illinois.

Since that time, the foundation has expanded its membership from five individuals to some 260 families, and its progress in furthering the cause of historical preservation in the Lake Forest area has been significant. “Interest in preserving the local architecture has, in a sense, become a common bond between the long-established families in Lake Forest and relative newcomers like Gayle and me,” Dick said.

With his interest in architecture and knowledge of management principles, as well as the expertise of the firm to draw upon, Dick plays an important role as the foundation’s chief (volunteer) consultant. “Without the experience and support of Dick and the firm, the foundation might never have gotten off the ground,” says Gayle. “We were having difficulty in obtaining a ruling from IRS as a qualified charitable organization because our stated purposes included a revolving fund for the possible acquisition and sale of properties. DH&S’s Washington office, at Charlie Steele’s request, assisted in obtaining our qualification which stands as a precedent ruling,” Gayle said.

At this point, the foundation is clearly not just off the ground, but burgeoning at a significant rate. “As the foundation has grown, many other Lake Forest professionals including architects, bankers, corporate executives and lawyers have become actively involved,” Dick said.

The Preservation Foundation Newsletter, a quarterly publication which Gayle writes and Dick edits, is distributed to all citizens of Lake Forest and has been very effective in raising the awareness of local residents and securing additional memberships, donations and support for the organization. Included in each newsletter is information about the present and planned activities of the foundation; goals achieved and future issues to be considered; recent legal and tax developments having to do with preservation; notices of fundraising events; and editorials that address the question of why historical preservation concerns every citizen of Lake Forest.

Although the estates of Lake Forest, by their very size and number, tend to dominate the attention of the foundation, other historic structures in the city are also of great concern to the members. Working with local government, the foundation has been instrumental in saving and restoring a historic bridge, public buildings and various amenities of the local environment. One major project is the restoration of the city’s turn-of-the-century Chicago and Northwestern railroad station.

Over the years, the station’s beautiful floors, rafters, woodwork and other fine architectural features have suffered from hard use and lack of sufficient maintenance. The foundation has called upon the citizens of Lake Forest to support its efforts to restore the building to its original elegance, and the response has been very favorable. A dinner held in November 1978 netted $5,000 toward the cause, and a historic-house tour, scheduled for June of 1979, is expected to be equally successful.

The historical significance of Lake Forest is not an issue of solely local interest. In 1976, the greater part of the city’s east side was elected to the National Register of Historic Places, the country’s official listing of preservation-worthy sites. Election to the Register is considered the highest honor that can be awarded to a historic location; however, the award itself provides little or no actual protection of the significant area. Owners of historic properties are still free to do with what they will with their own land and buildings.

There are, nevertheless, many effective measures that can be taken to encourage — and even enforce — the preservation of irreplaceable architecture and sites. According to Gayle, one of the best ways of preventing arbitrary demolition of certain prop-
eties is for owners to place restrictions in the deeds to their lands. "In the past," she said, "historically valuable estates have been sold for development, and, when the developers subdivide the estates into lots for smaller homes, the original manor houses and landscaping have often fallen prey to bulldozers."

"The property owner can control this, however," Gayle went on, "by placing a restriction or 'easement' in the deed. In simple terms, an easement inhibits the deedholder's use of that part of the property affected by the easement. For instance, the owner of an estate may place an easement in the deed specifying that the main building and landscaping may not be destroyed or appreciably altered by subsequent owners. In this way, the original beauty of the estate may be perpetually preserved for the enjoyment of all."

"Naturally, this kind of legal procedure involves a number of financial considerations," explained Dick. Because historical preservation has become so widely recognized as a valuable enterprise in recent years, legal provisions have been made to ensure that landowners may be equitably rewarded for preserving their valuable properties. Today, the decrease in property value brought about by restrictions imposed by an easement may actually result in a twofold financial advantage for the property owner. First, the fair market value of the easement may be taken as a charitable contribution deduction on the owner's federal income tax return; and second, the easement generally reduces the property's value and, consequently, the real estate tax.

Another highly effective means of preserving valuable properties is the implementation of historical zoning legislation. The objective of historical zoning, a concept developed about twenty years ago, is to preserve the historical character of a city primarily through the prudent issuance of building permits. Any archi-
This charming Lake Forest manor, known as "Ragdale," has been in the owner's family for more than eighty years. The house was designed by the owner's grandfather, architect Howard Van Doren Shaw, in the late 1800s, and the lambs shown here were done by the owner's mother, sculptress Sylvia Shaw Judson.

Dining room of the Lake Forest estate known as "Ragdale." Built in the late 1800s by the owner's grandfather, architect Howard Van Doren Shaw, Ragdale has recently been converted into a retreat for writers and artists.
This beautiful estate house has been in the family of its owners for many decades. Plans for its design were patterned after those of a similar country home in Wales.

A recommendation to implement historical zoning legislation in Lake Forest has been submitted to the city by the foundation, and it is expected that a new zoning law will be enacted in the near future. While the ordinance is being drafted, a six-month moratorium on development of historic properties is in effect in the city. Several recent incidents of historically valuable properties being destroyed or visually obstructed through insensitive construction and development have caused the residents of Lake Forest to rise up in support of the foundation's conservationist ideals.

Though charitable easements and historical zoning will be major boons to the preservation of the unique atmosphere of Lake Forest, the problem of finding uses for mansions that may be abandoned in the coming years remains. Imaginative property owners in the city have already come up with a number of alternatives to private maintenance, and Gayle and the members of the foundation are constantly investigating others.

"What we are looking for," said Gayle, "are ways of utilizing these historic buildings without drastically altering their exterior appearance and settings. With a little imagination, the possibilities can be endless." So far, abandoned manor houses have been turned into religious seminaries, business conference centers and multifamily dwellings, and other possible uses include condominiums and homes for the elderly. The owner of the pastoral estate Ragdale, which has belonged to her family for three generations, decided to transform her home into a retreat for writers and artists, and the facility has become so popular that she is now able to accommodate only a fraction of those who wish to live there.

Gayle and Dick are optimistic about the future of the Lake Forest Foundation for Historic Preservation. It appears that the objectives for which they and the other foundation members have worked so long and arduously are coming to fruition. "Community support of our organization is increasing every day," said Gayle. "With the government solidly behind the goals of the foundation, the future looks very promising indeed. Historical preservation has now become a primary factor when considering changes and development in Lake Forest."