



Story available at <http://billingsgazette.net/articles/2008/05/25/features/yourhome/18-heritagehomes.txt>

Published on Sunday, May 25, 2008.
Last modified on 5/25/2008 at 2:04 am

Take a closer look at homes on the Heritage Home Tour

By ANNA PAIGE
Gazette Special Sections Writer

Tom and Tina Meurer knew they wanted an older home. They just had to find the right one.

Nearly ten years into their search, they found it. Located on the corner of North 31st Street and 11th Avenue North, the home was snatched up by the couple the very day it was to go on the market.

Overgrown with creeping ivy, the two-story arts and crafts-style home is nearly hidden. Yet beneath the strings of foliage unfolds a stately American Foursquare, a house style popular through the late 1930s.

The home's plain stucco exterior, accented with brick, was an architectural counter to ornate Victorian homes of the time. It's classic, practical nature was just the beginning of its appeal to the Meurers.

"We wanted an original home," Tom said.

Many of the homes the couple looked at had lost their character through woodwork painted over and renovations that altered the original design of the home.

From the existing windows to the ornate trim to the structural integrity, the Meurer's home is a genuine work of art.

The house was designed and constructed in 1927 by the architectural firm run by John G. Link and Charles S. Haire.

Link and Haire designed some of Billings most prominent downtown buildings, including the original Parmly Billings Library, the Securities, Electrical and Stapelton buildings, St Patrick's Co-Cathedral and the Masonic Temple.

A detailed look at the Meurer home

It takes a certain type of person to seek out an older home. The Meurer's previous residence was a fixer-upper on Yellowstone Avenue, so they were familiar with the maintenance an older home requires.

Tina was enamored with the home on North 31st Street until she reached the kitchen, and was intimidated by the renovations required to make it functional. But Tom's optimism paid off, and the couple is celebrating six years in their dream home.

The home was originally constructed for the Lamb family. The Meurers bought the home from Edith Yapuncich, who was the second owner of the home. Yapuncich lived in the home nearly 50 years before selling it.

Characteristic of a Four-square, the home's first floor has a living room, dining room, kitchen and "cold room" on the home's south side. The foyer houses the stairway that leads upstairs.

Upstairs, five bedrooms and a full bathroom are located along the perimeter of the home. A powder room is located on the first floor.

The Meurers added a fireplace to the living room and refinished the wood floors throughout the main level. The kitchen and powder room were renovated.

At the back of the home, off the kitchen, is the "cold room" where the original ice box was, and where the Meurer's refrigerator still is. The couple is frequently asked why they didn't knock out the wall to make the kitchen larger.

"Why would you do that?" Tom said. "That would just be a shame."

A bedroom upstairs, dubbed the "Ice Palace" by previous owners, is being used as recreational space.

When looking for the room's storm windows in the basement, the Meurers discovered exactly what that nickname meant.

Not only is the room located directly over the garage, due to the home's settling, the windows didn't close all the way. This issue has been corrected, but the room still remains a chilly place in the winter.

The home only has a couple original light fixtures, one with a "dimmer" switch Tom discovered while dusting the fixture. Such fixtures sell on Ebay for upwards of \$3,500.

Another original artifact in the home is the whole-house intercom system, manufactured by Masco. Tom tried to use the system once, but due to the old wiring was afraid of causing an electrical fire. The system still works, though only upstairs.

One of the bedrooms still has the original wallpaper. The rest of the home's wallpaper has been replaced. Tina made sure to select styles in accordance to the time period, and even fooled a historical architect who thought her wallpaper upgrade in the back bedroom was original.

In the time the Meurers have owned the home, they have updated, refinished, restored and have taken on countless projects throughout.

"We're not done yet," Tom said. The couple is in process of renovating their upstairs bathroom, as well as the basement.

Taking a historic tour

The Meurer's home is one of several Link and Haire creations on the annual Heritage Home Tour, taking place from 10 a.m. till 4 p.m. Saturday at select downtown locations.

The tour will also feature designs of Chandler C. Cohagen, who practiced from about 1915 into the 1970s. Cohagen is one of the city's best-known architects, particularly for the Mission Revival homes he designed in the Pioneer Park area and his 1930 remodel to the Oliver Building.

The tour features single-family residences as well as commercial buildings designed by the architects, including the Oliver and Stapleton buildings, which now house businesses, condominiums and loft apartments.

One of the more prominent Link and Haire designs is the private residence of Corby Skinner.

"The Castle," located on the 600 block of North 29th Street, was once situated at the edge of town with a rimrock wall to the distant north and seemingly endless prairie lands to the west.

This historic landmark is listed in the National Register of Historic places. It was built during 1902 and 1903 for Austin North, a Billings entrepreneur and real estate developer.

The house was an adaptation of Chicago's Potter Palmer mansion, whose design was based on that of an English castle. Some of its exterior medieval characteristics include a three-story turret topped with battlements and crow-stepped gables. Semicircular arches are located over the windows.

The sandstone for the foundation was quarried from the nearby Rimrocks, and the building features red brick walls and sandstone trim.

The Castle's original grounds included a carriage house, which has been converted to a guest house, and a livery stable, which houses Juliano's restaurant.

Inside 'The Castle'

Skinner moved into The Castle more than twenty years ago, and rented the third floor. At that time, the home was owned by Senia Hart, who purchased the building in the early 1970s to prevent it from being torn down.

Hart, an active preservationist of Western history, had a hand in preserving several Billings landmarks including the Western Heritage Center and the Rex Hotel, which she also purchased to save from destruction.

Over the years, the Castle has housed plenty of businesses and residents. At some point it was converted into apartments. As people moved in and out, Skinner continued to rent the house. He took over the second floor lease and eventually was the home's sole occupant. Then in 1991 he purchased the building from Hart.

"It was the white elephant," Skinner said. From years of rental tenants, the home was in disrepair.

"When I bought this house and came to realize it was finally mine, I started ripping things apart," Skinner said.

Because there was an art gallery on the first floor, the windows were covered with particle board that artwork hung from. As Skinner tore down the particle board, he uncovered the home's many windows as well as the ornate wood trim around the doorways.

He also discovered the interior French doors stored in the home's original stairwell, which had been boarded up when the property was converted into apartments.

The home has had its fair share of close calls. About eight years ago a water line burst under Juliano's restaurant, flooding the ground underneath The Castle and causing the guest house to sink four inches.

Towards the back of the home, a private room that overlooks the back garden was once the office of the home's second owner, Dr. Morrison. His grandfather was a ship captain and the room was covered in wallpaper featuring lighthouses of the English Channel. Most of the wallpaper was ruined when a leak upstairs came through the ceiling.

Skinner, who is the Alberta Bair Theater marketing director, operates a public relations firm that from the first floor of The Castle, and lives on the second and third floor.

Because of the nature of Skinner's work, he often entertains friends, coworkers and cultural performers at The Castle. Skinner said Hart expressed a desire to have people in and through the Castle.

"She liked the fact that people could come in and enjoy the home," Skinner said.

The home is adorned with Skinner's personal effects, including his regional contemporary and Native American art collections, Persian carpets and various furniture antiques.

"When I started here, I had a folding table and chairs. Now I have five buffets," Skinner said, laughing. "I love antiques, and as my collection grew, I thought, 'Where would I move all this stuff?'"

Copyright © The Billings Gazette, a division of [Lee Enterprises](#).