



Allyn Mansion:

A LABOR OF LOVE

BY LISA M. SCHMELZ

Ron Markwell is seated in the library of his 23-room mansion in an oversize camel-colored leather chair. At his feet, Daryl, a yellow Lab-Husky mix, is resting comfortably on an antique rug. The only artificial light comes from a Tiffany-style lamp, while a small stream of late afternoon sunlight makes its way through a window framed in squared panels of stained glass. On the mantle of the marble fireplace, two brass candlesticks stand guard like soldiers, as an antique clock announces every passing second. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases wrap their way around the room. Beyond the pocket door of the library are many other compelling rooms, but the library is Markwell's favorite.

"It's cozy," Markwell says to a visitor seated across from him, "especially on a winter night when it's snowing outside."

While Markwell has a favorite room in his turn-of-the-century Victorian home, neither he nor his near-constant canine sidekick are overly impressed by their surroundings.

"I'm jaded. I've been here 26 years," he says casually. "Of course, I still think it's beautiful, but I'm not bowled over by it like people usually are when they come in here."

"Bowled over" would be an appropriate reaction for a first- or even fiftieth-time visitor to Markwell's astounding home. Even if you come from old money, this residence, known as Allyn Mansion, is one of Wisconsin's richest architectural treasures. Designed by famed architect E. Townsend Mix for successful dairy farmer and Swiss cattle breeder Alexander Hamilton Allyn in 1884, the mansion sits in the heart of Delavan's downtown district, refusing to be ignored. Rising three stories, its cream city brick and wood-shingled exterior is awash in decorative detail. "It's the result of a wealthy Victorian who felt that in order to show people in town how wealthy he was, his house had to

be the biggest," explains Markwell of Allyn's motivation.

Allyn is still showcasing his wealth 127 years later; this is one of those homes you could drive or walk by daily and still fail to fully inventory. Standing outside it on the sidewalk, and many do, it takes real effort to focus on just one detail at a time.

There are 10 fireplaces inside and five chimneys rise above the roofline. A center tower, flanked by carved wooden birds on the peaked roofline, rises above everything. The wooden posts on the landing? Those are drip posts. The attached drive-thru structure on the western side of the home? That's a porte-cochère.



The Allyn Mansion in the late 1800s. Photo courtesy of Ron Markwell



Those lucky enough to cross the threshold find that the inside matches the outside. Every inch of this 9,500-square-foot, 12-bedroom home exceeds expectations. There are hand-stenciled walls and ceilings, deeply inset stained-glass panes surrounding clear panes of glass, and dark inlaid woods everywhere; Eastlake-style furnishings adorn as much they transport the place back in time. But a well-preserved time capsule isn't what Markwell, a retired high school English teacher, and his late partner, Joe Johnson, a college French professor, found when they purchased the home in 1984 via a land contract. What greeted them at that time was a sorely neglected landmark that had served for 15 years as a nursing home and then for 12 years as a furniture store. Obscuring the home's glory were gallons of paint, eight layers of wallpaper, and walls not original to the home. And the greatest crime to any home, but especially one as rich in history as this: Wall-to-wall shag carpeting over magnificent plank flooring derived from old-growth trees. To restore the home, Markwell and Johnson had to reduce it to its core.



"We were single-minded because we knew what this house could look like," says Markwell of his and Johnson's devotion to its revival. "We had to develop tunnel vision. We'd get up in the morning and focus on what had to be done that day."

Markwell and Johnson shared a passion for restoring Victorian homes, and Allyn Mansion was not their first. It would, however, be their biggest. What they thought would take eight years spanned 18. Johnson removed layer after layer of wallpaper. Markwell stripped paint from walls and woodwork. When they found Mix's original exterior drawings of the home in the basement, they knew they had to bring back what had been robbed in the name of home improvement.

Realizing this was no longer a hobby and that they'd need a way to finance the home's salvation, they opened a bed and breakfast in 1986. While they served guests, they also hired expert craftsmen to replace the missing tower and porte-cochère. As detailed stencil work was uncovered beneath wallpaper and atop ceilings, artists were hired to recreate it. As the home recovered its roots, Markwell and Johnson, both established antique collectors, began

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furnishing it, mostly with Eastlake pieces from all over the country. The stunning result of their exacting attention to detail is a living, breathing piece of the past.

“Everything was painstakingly created,” says Markwell “There were no accidents. That’s why it looks right.”

More than a home

Over its 21-year life as a bed and breakfast, Markwell and Johnson formed close ties with repeat guests equally committed to historic preservation. Seeing the length Markwell and Johnson were going to in their restoration journey also impressed many Delavan residents. More than a home, the Allyn Mansion was a large calling card that brought together people of a similar preservationist ilk. Among them was John Cangelosi, who owned a home on Delavan Lake. When another property believed by experts to be a Mix design went on the market in 2003 in downtown Delavan, Cangelosi snatched it up and then turned to Markwell for advice. Unaware of the significance of owning a Mix design, Cangelosi was quickly brought up to speed. “I was schooled (by) Ron Markwell,” Cangelosi says. “He taught me a lot.”

Cangelosi’s home was built for Allyn in 1869, so he could watch over construction of his mansion a block away. No cracker box, it boasts three stories, seven bedrooms, five fireplaces and five bathrooms over 5,000 square feet. Like Markwell and Johnson, Cangelosi and his wife, Jeriann, labored to bring back what once was; no easy task given that this home had been carved into four apartments by the time the Cangelosies acquired it. As the Cangelosies peeled back the layers, pieces of the past were revealed. In the floorboards of the attic, they found the former Mayor of Delavan’s stationery; on it was markings from one of his children trying to complete a homework assignment. Behind the fireplace mantle, an aging partial photograph of an unknown occupant.

Today, the home is a reminder of a different era and is, in turn, inspiring others to save nearby Victorians in downtown Delavan.

A Chicago carpenter contractor, Cangelosi marvels at what Mix and his crew achieved at the turn of the century. “You couldn’t duplicate what’s in these houses for millions of dollars,” he says. “Even the wood that was used, the trees died off years ago.”

The Allyn Mansion Through The Years

1884 – Alexander Hamilton Allyn, a successful dairy farmer and breeder of Brown Swiss dairy cattle, commissions E. Townsend Mix to design his downtown Delavan mansion.

1885 – The Queen Anne is completed and becomes the third home of Allyn and his second wife, Mary Elizabeth Doolittle. In addition to Allyn Mansion, he had an eight-acre estate on Delavan Lake and a winter home in Los Angeles.

1913 – Allyn dies.

1929 – Getting on in years, Mrs. Allyn adds an elevator to the home.

1939 – Mrs. Allyn, who remained in the mansion following her husband’s death, dies. Her step-daughter, Esther, lives in the home until 1948. Maintenance decisions at that time do little to enhance the residence and its tower, porte-cochère and porch were demolished when their repair needs grew too burdensome.

1950 – Heirs of the Allyn family sell the home to the City of Delavan.

1952 – The City sells the mansion to a nursing home, in part because of the elevator Mrs. Allyn added 23 years earlier. As a nursing home, the home’s integrity suffers greatly. Bathrooms are remodeled, a fire escape is added, and a side garden with a period gazebo and fountain is lost.

1966 – The nursing home closes.

1969 – After remaining vacant for three years, the home is purchased and converted into a furniture store. Over its 12-year tenure as a furniture store, Markwell and Johnson would come through more than once.

1984 – Ron Markwell, a high school English teacher, and Joe Johnson, a college French professor, who have already restored two Victorian homes and established themselves in the antique business, purchase the mansion and begin an 18-year restoration.

1985 – Allyn Mansion is placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

1986 – Markwell and Johnson open the doors of Allyn Mansion as a bed and breakfast.

1992 – Johnson and Markwell receive the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Great American Home grand prize for their “meticulous and thorough restoration of the Allyn Mansion.”

2007 – Allyn Mansion ceases operations as a B&B, and Johnson and Markwell put the home on the real estate market.

2009 – Joe Johnson is murdered at a home he is renovating in Mexico. At the time of Johnson’s tragic death, Allyn Mansion is still for sale. Markwell takes the house off the market, deciding this is where he wants to remain.

2011 – No longer open to the general public, Markwell makes Allyn Mansion available to charities, particularly those with preservationist ties, for fundraising events.



THE ALLYN MANSION GRACES THE COVER OF WISCONSIN’S OWN: TWENTY REMARKABLE HOMES. FOR MORE DETAILS, SNAP THIS TAG.

The mark of Mix

Mix's influence in 19th-century architecture was significant, and he played a pivotal role in the development of states from Nebraska to New York. An architect who used a variety of styles and types depending on the preferences of his clients and the building's function, the mark of Mix can still be seen in Delavan, Milwaukee, Monroe and Montauk, Iowa. Famous in Midwestern architectural circles, Mix had over 300 buildings to his credit before he died in 1890. In Milwaukee, he designed some of the city's most prominent buildings, including Music Hall in 1865, Iron Block in 1860, and the Chamber of Commerce in 1879, all of which are still standing.

Letting go while holding on

For Johnson, the journey of saving a property was the destination, Markwell recalls. Even as the accolades poured in, Johnson was restless and took on other restoration projects. He wasn't content, it seemed, to rest on Allyn Mansion's laurels. In 1985, the home was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1992, the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Great American Home grand prize was awarded to Johnson and Markwell for their "meticulous and thorough restoration." But those honors weren't anything Johnson wanted to hang his hat on.

"He lost interest in this," Markwell says. "He'd come into a project full-tilt, and when it was done, he'd want to move on."

In 2009, Johnson was splitting his time between Allyn Mansion and a property in Mexico he was restoring. On the morning of March 7, according to news reports, his body was found by workers he had hired, and a Mexican newspaper reported Johnson was beaten to death. When the news of Johnson's murder reached Markwell, a "for sale" sign was on the front lawn of Allyn Mansion. The plan was for Markwell to sell the home and join Johnson in Mexico. The couple would then split their time between Mexico and another Midwestern Victorian they owned.

Wracked with grief, one of the first things Markwell did was have the sign removed. How long will Markwell, 76, hold on to Allyn Mansion and the memories inside? "I'd like to stay here until I'm carried out," he says. ▲

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