



Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society - Research Article

A Tall Yellow Treasure

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Casting a sidelong glance toward Orchard Lake while traveling along Pontiac Trail, motorists may catch a quick glimpse of a tall, yellow treasure that stands buried among a multitude of towering trees. It does not, however, contain the traditional ingredients of a treasure; there are no golden coins or precious jewels. One need not even bring a shovel to uncover its riches. It is a three-story boathouse with an offering of wealth that has been discovered and rediscovered throughout the eighty plus years it has overlooked the southern shore of Orchard Lake. The wealth of this unusual treasure lies both in its preserved architectural beauty and its historical importance.

The building was erected in the early 1900s by Willis C. Ward, the grandfather of its current owner, Virginia Ward. Ward bequeathed the boathouse to his granddaughter in his will when he died in 1944. His father, David Lee Ward, and his son, Harold Lee Ward, were both prominent businessmen in the Orchard Lake area, as was Ward himself.

Willis Ward, who spent much of his time on Orchard Lake, commuted from home to office by boat. The two locations were on opposite shores of the lake. Ward was also an avid sailor. Consequently, he was in need of a place to keep his boats, and he decided to construct the storage space himself. What Ward built, however, was much more than a simple shelter for his boats. He

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H O M E J O U R N A L S

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Photograph by Austin Alexander

See page 5

created a wooden boathouse with a majestic charm that has been preserved and enjoyed to this day.

The first level of the building is a large, one-room area where boats are kept. Creme-colored barn doors, comprising the bottom third of the lakeside portion of the house, open directly on the lake. A gently sloping white dock extends out into the water for several yards, seeming to be a continuation of the floor of the storage area. The space still includes the original pulley and track equipment used by Willis Ward. The area is large enough to accommodate two or three small boats, and in its earlier days, it was often occupied by Ward's and his friends' sailboats. At one time, Ward also kept an antique mahogany electric launch in the boathouse. It now houses an electric canoe that belongs to Virginia Ward and her son Todd, but because the canoe is not in working order, the doors of the storage area are locked for the present.

An outdoor stairway attached to the west side of the building leads to the second floor. A small white door opens into a spacious, one-room area with a high ceiling. Unique style and beauty pervades the room, as it appears in the same glance to be a quaint cottage and a dignified mansion, a triumphant combination of old and new décor. Newly sanded and varnished last year, the walls, floor and ceiling are constructed of wide boards of deep brown mahogany wood that lend the room its stately appearance. Wicker furniture and a peppering of oriental paper lanterns on the ceiling provide a homey, comfortable touch.

Several antique pieces, such as a large dining room table placed in the center of the room, give the second level a Victorian flavor. The boathouse yesteryear is preserved in faded black and white portraits and pictures that decorate the walls and bureau-tops.

On the east side of the house, there are three sets of double windows covered with venetian blinds. Two sets of double doors, also sporting full-length shades, lead to the porches that extend from the front and back of the boathouse. Wicker chairs and tables on both porches create a cot tag atmosphere.

Climbing the outdoor stairway one more flight, the third level of the building comes into view. This top floor is a wide open deck, enclosed only by a four-sided wooden railing and a tiled roof that crowns the entire structure. Ladders leading to and screening the upper level have worn out with the years, but it still maintains much of its original character.

"You get a fantastic view of the sunset on the deck," notes 19-year-old Todd. "On July 4, we got a spectacular view of the colors of the sun on the lake combined with the bursting colors of the fireworks."

It not only provides an ideal observation deck, but it is also a unique place to hold a summer party. "The place just comes alive," said Virginia. Mrs. Ward has held one large party at the boathouse, and has also loaned it to friends for the same purpose.

The third level is perfect for moonlight music and dancing. For her party, Mrs. Ward decorated the deck ceiling with colorful Japanese lanterns.

"It was lovely. I used the middle deck for hors d'oeuvres and socializing," she said, with a reminiscent smile on her lips. "It could hold 200 in a squeeze," laughs Todd, who held a large party at the boathouse for his friends last summer.

"It's a good place to just sort of camp-out for the week-end," Mrs. Ward commented, a petite, 64-year-old woman. Every summer, she spends her days at the boathouse, as she resides nearby in Pontiac. Even before 1971, when she was married and living in Colorado, she and her husband would return to Orchard Lake to enjoy the boathouse during the summer months.

"The sand declines very gradually on our lake shore, so it's ideal for swimming," said Mrs. Ward, who often goes to the boathouse just for a relaxing swim.

Such peace and quiet has not always characterized this haven. Until Mrs. Ward's father, Harold Ward, and his father and sister donated land for the Orchard Lake Country Club in 1926, the club's sailors used the boathouse as a starting point for their sailboat races.

Recalling childhood memories of the boathouse, Mrs. Ward comments, "For a long while after the club started, we hardly used the boathouse." But the sailors have begun to return. Last summer, they hosted a pot-luck picnic dinner for them, and plan to make the event an annual affair.

"It was really quite a success," said Mrs. Ward. "They'd all heard about the boathouse because of its connection with their 'predecessors'."

The tall, yellow boathouse has indeed carved a place for itself in Orchard Lake history. Speaking for the Ward family, Mrs. Ward says, "I think we all have good associations with it. It has sort of its own character." Her father, Harold Ward, had a special attachment to the boathouse and its surrounding that left him longing to return to Orchard Lake for the past several years. He had, however, been unable to travel since late 1979, and he never had the opportunity to see the boathouse before his June 26 death.

"He thought about it all the time," commented Mrs. Ward, who spoke with her father on the phone regularly.

With a distant look in her eyes, she added, "On my father's last visit a few years ago, the first thing he said when he arrived at the boathouse was, 'oh, it smells just the same'."

As though it were a trait that could be biologically perpetuated, Todd, Ward's grandson, expresses a similar love of and respect for the boathouse.

"I grew up with it," he says. His many memories keep him coming back to the boathouse, and he enjoys spending time there with his friends. He is often out at the lake during the summer, because he is a sailing instructor for the Orchard Lake Country Club.

Sometime in the years to come, he would like to make the property into a home. It would need a plumbing system, for instance, but the task of converting the boathouse into a permanent residence intrigues the younger Todd. His aspirations seem to guarantee the future of the boathouse. It will continue to stand as a monument to a unique architecture, and it will rightfully remain in the possession of Ward descendants.

Todd vows they'll never accept any of the numerous offers they have continuously received for the property. "It's not for sale," he says, "it belongs in the family and he intends to keep it there. □

by Marjorie Roberts

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A Tall Yellow Treasure

CARING a sibling relationship with the Orchard Lake waterfront along Pontiac, Michigan, the Wards' houses may seem like a tall, yellow rectangle of wood built around a mid-size swimming pool. But the traditional ingredients of a summer vacation home are present. One need not even bring a shovel to dig a hole in the ground for a three-story bungalow with an offshoot of a sunroom on the second floor. The house has been thoroughly thumped through the eighty years since it was built on the southern shore of Orchard Lake. The wood is weathered, the exterior paint both in and out is peeling, and the windows are broken.

The building was erected in the early 1900s by George Ward, whose father, his grandfather, is an easterner, originally from New York. He brought the bungalow to his grandfather in his mid-twenties, and the two men, David Lee Ward, and his son, Harold Lee Ward, ran their own businesses on the Orchard Lake area, says Ward.

Willis Ward, who spent much of his manhood on the lake, still remembers his father's house as being a family home by effacy. The two boys were allowed to swim in the lake. Ward was also an avid sailor. Consequently, he had a special place to keep his boats, and he decided to build a deck on the water to store them. What Ward built, however, was much more than a simple shelter to hold his boats. It was a two-story bungalow with a majestic porch that has been preserved to this day.

The first level of the building is a large room containing a fireplace and a large screened-in porch. The second story is kept. Screened-out back doors, connecting the porch to the inside portion of the house, open directly onto the deck. A wide dock extends out into the water for storing boats and for the concession of the use of the storage

area. The space still includes the original fireplace, which is used today by Willis Ward. The room is large enough to accommodate four or five people at a time. It is here that he often entertains his wife.

"I often call it my 'lair,'" said Ward, who keeps an antique mahogany chest there. "It's a quiet place where I can sit in an electric chair that hangs to keep me from getting too fatigued, but because the chair is in working order, the doors of the storage area are left open."

An outside staircase leads down to the sand beach, which is located in the same area as the Ward residence. A small white door opens

onto a spacious, one-room area with a high ceiling. Unique style and beauty distinguish the room. The walls are paneled in a light-colored wood, giving the same glaze to a aquatic cottage and the interior of a boat. The room is a combination of old and new decor. The floor is made of polished wood, the walls, floor, and ceiling are covered in a combination of light-colored deep brown mahogany wood that tend the greenish tint of the water. The furniture and a peeling of ornate metal work are all in keeping with a history, comfortable touch.

Several antique pieces, such as a large dining room table and chairs, are tucked away in the great room, which is a Victorian flavor. The boudoir contains a large four-poster bed and white portraits and pictures that date back to the 1920s.

On the east side of the house, there are three sets of double windows

concealed with valances. Two sets of double doors, the sporting goods room, and a porch that extends from the front and back of the house are located on the east side. The tall windows on the porch talles on both porches create a cottage atmosphere.

Clearing the number one way out of the house is a walkway that leads to the beach. The walkway is a building coming out into the water. This is the boat

Advertising Feature

is a wide open deck, enclosed only by a four-sided wooden railing and a cedar screen. The screen is made of cedar shingles leading in and screening the porch. The screen is about ten years old, but it still maintains most of its original strength.

"You get a fantastic view of the lake from the porch," said George Ward. "On July 4, we get a spectacular view of the fireworks from the porch. It not only provides an ideal observation deck, but it is also a unique place to have a barbecue. You can't get nearer water," said Virginia Ward, who has been living in the bungalow for the last twenty years.

The porch is the favorite part of the house, according to Mrs. Ward. "It is the best place to sit and talk with your friends. We have a lot of fun on the porch. We have a lot of fun on the porch, and we also have a lot of fun on the beach," Mrs. Ward continues.

"I am a good swimmer," she said. "I used to swim in the lake when I was a child. I could hold my breath for about two minutes. I could hold 200 in a straight line," laughs Todd, who has been swimming in the lake since his first late summer.

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