

Talking walls

Susanne Richter and Bernie Latremouille restored a 135-year-old inn, then created 'history walls' that give back voices to an ambitious architect and six Gananoque families

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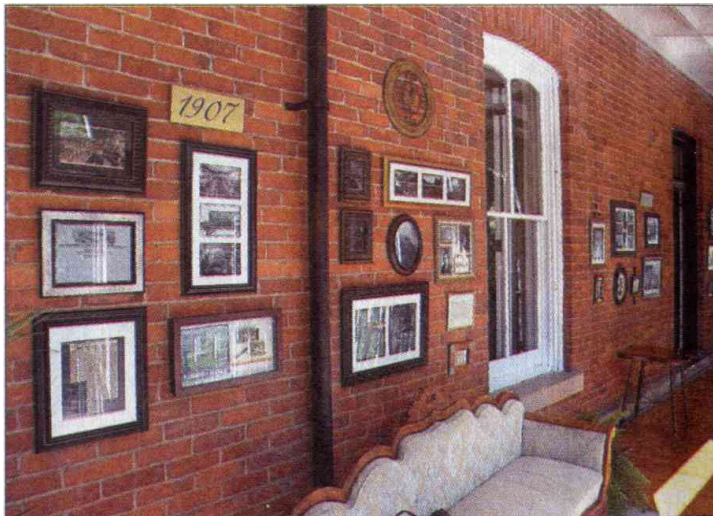
Susanne Richter has resurrected voices from the past, adding life to an impressive red brick mansion built in 1873 when both Gananoque and the country were brand new.

This determined, buoyant mother of two young boys has swept away the cobwebs of time, along with worn carpeting and coats of faded pink paint, from the Victoria Rose, a 12-room inn that now has Burberry umbrellas by the front door and fresh flowers on tabletops.

Each morning, guests have the choice of sitting on the rear patio or on a covered porch, enjoying fresh orange juice and helpings of a history that stretches back 135 years to when a new architect, Robert Gage, was commissioned by William Byers to build a house for his young wife.

In all, there have been six owners of the ornate house, which witnessed tough years when local economics turned it into a rooming house, then a restaurant, until it became a sophisticated inn with walls that talk.

Six "history walls" are now scattered through the main level, detailing the lives and tragedies of families in a montage of dates, framed photographs and words. In addition, Gage's story sits over the grand piano in the living room.



On the wall are copies of his original plans and details from an article by Jennifer McKendry for Ontario History, a slim book sponsored by the Ontario Historical Society in the spring of 2005.

Gage, like many of today's architects, was influenced by his peers, following designs made popular in American plan books of the early 1870s.

Even then, Glenwood, the mansion on King Street West, was ambitious, with huge cost overruns, according to research done by McKendry.

Marble was brought from Europe and fine tapestries were hung on walls to ensure a helping of warmth in the Italianate-styled home of creamy stone and ornate trim.

Gage consulted the Victorian Village Builder for paint colours and accessories, including heating grates and door handles.

Within five years, the financially-strapped Byers were forced to sell Glenwood and its 20 acres of land to teacher and town examiner, Samuel McCammon. It was sold again in 1907, this time to a rivet manufacturer, Wilfred Bulloch, who started a young family in the house and built an elaborate chicken

coop in the back. The two-storey poultry barn was used to raise prize winning fowl, a popular past time of the wealthy in the early 1900's.

Although the extravagant structure disappeared long ago, its crooked foundation is visible in the garden.

Apparently the chicken coop was moved and made into affordable apartments in Gananoque, says Richter, who this past winter haunted the local library, the registry office, the archives at Queen's University in Kingston, the Gananoque Reporter and the web, searching for old newspaper stories and photographs -- threads to stitch together a tapestry of the owners.

Her boys, Gabriel, 8, and Feliz, 6, were in school and while the inn was closed for the season she had time and boundless helpings of energy, wanting to add personality to the renovations she and her husband Bernie Latremouille had trudged through during the first two years.

It's been a dusty haul for the couple, who three years ago traded morning stops at Starbucks and their renovated home in the Glebe for running the Victoria Rose Inn in Gananoque.

It was a homecoming of sorts. Richter grew up in an old stone home in Kingston, spending summers on a sailboat outside of Gananoque. She wanted new challenges and had a history of working with the Four Seasons Hotel in Montreal and 12 years of working with museums in Ottawa. The couple wanted to give their boys a sense of community and living by the river.

Richter also loved older homes and bringing old stories alive.

When they opened once again for business in the spring of 2007, the old house gleamed, but didn't have a soul. Hundreds of stories were hidden behind the walls, waiting to be told.

Along with her research, Richter talked to neighbours. She discovered pictures and newspaper articles about the McLaughlin, a creamy-coloured and very expensive touring car that carried the Prince of Wales on a 1927 visit to Canada. The car was bought by Jack Bulloch, who bought the house from his brother's estate. The car now belongs to the Museum of Science and Technology on St. Laurent Boulevard.

A phone call to Whitby tracked down Janet Mason, a Bulloch descendant, who came for a visit with a bag of invaluable pictures and more details.

"These walls can now talk; they can tell a story. They are alive," says Richter. "We all want our homes to have a sense of stability and now these very strong walls that have gone through many storms and winters have stories to tell."

It's not difficult to create history or memory walls and homes do not have to be 135 years old to be a likely candidate, says Richter.

It's also not expensive if you shop carefully for frames. The couple cruised aisles in Michaels, The Craft Superstore, Home Depot, HomeSense, Winners and even Zellers.

They framed the pieces of history in the basement of the Victoria Rose.

They assembled faded pictures, portraits, copies of bills of sale and a factual, mournful letter telling of Wilfred Bulloch's widow's decision to sell the house and move her young daughters to more affordable lodgings in Toronto.

Her brother-in-law, Jack Bulloch, ended up buying the house and land for \$8,000 in 1919. In 1951, Bulloch sold it to Margaret Webb who ran a tourist- rooming house until 1963. Another couple operated rooms and small apartments until 1975. In its darkest years, there was a checkered history of scandal and dogs running in the hallways.

Two Toronto men rescued the home, turning it into a fine restaurant, but economics soured and it was sold again, this time operating as an inn with a heavy helping of pink chintz, dried flowers and food service.

Richter and Latremouille saw a sale notice on the Internet while holidaying in Key West in the winter of 2005. By June, they were in the first year of running an inn and living next door.

Today, the Victoria Rose is a restored lady with a soul and many vintage stories worth sharing.

Sheila Brady is the Citizen's Homes Editor. You can reach her at sbrady@thecitizen.canwest.com .

IF YOU GO

The Victoria Rose Inn,

279 King St. West, Gananoque

Open from May to mid-November

For reservations, call 1-613-382-3368 or toll-free 1-888-246-2893 or visit www.victoriaroseinn.com.

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