

TRUE TALES OF COLONIAL ACRES

The History Of One Michigan Home

by James VanVulpen

I

On Kalamazoo Avenue, in the far southern part of Grand Rapids, stands a house which has been a neighborhood landmark for most of the twentieth century.

Decades before the city grew to surround it, this home with tall Greek revival portico and classic colonial lines held a special charm for passersby. Within these walls, at least ten families have carried on their lives during more than ninety years.

And, earlier than any human habitation, there was the historic land itself.

Imagine the site as God made it, rolling hills covered with virgin forest and dotted with natural clearings. Along the eastern slope of this hill, just a few hundred yards from where the house stands, once ran the main Indian trail between the Kalamazoo Valley and the rapids of Grand River. Near this spot, a fine spring on the hill offered refreshment to thirsty travelers. Countless moccasin-clad feet, passing north or south, knew this land for generations before the United States bought it from the Ottawa tribe in 1821.

The horses and oxen of Kent County's early white settlers were still a new and rare sight along the trail in 1836, when the hill first passed into private hands. That year, a speculator named Nathaniel Weed paid the government \$1.25 an acre for more than a square mile in and around section twenty-one of Paris Township. Weed lived in New York

City and probably saw his purchase rarely, if ever. Like other investors who'd hoped to turn a quick profit from the eighteen-thirties Michigan land rush, he got caught by the financial crash of '37, and years passed before he could find buyers.

It was 1846 when a young farmer named John Luther took the northwest quarter-section off his hands. Luther and his bride cleared a farm and raised a family on the northern part of their land. They sold off the eighty-acre southern half where the spring flowed, and it went through a series of owners.

By 1850 the trail had been widened into a dirt road, where a daily stagecoach line ran to Kalamazoo. These coaches were the crude "mud-wagon" type, more like covered wagons with canvas tops and wooden seats than like the familiar Concord stages that came here later. The route was proposed for a plank-paved toll road, but the highway eventually completed in 1855 was built where Division Avenue runs today.

Still, the original forest covering much of section twenty-one and the surrounding area did provide most of the toll road's planks. Lumberjacks hauled the logs to Tanner's Mill, at the present northwest corner of Kalamazoo and Forty-fourth streets, where they were sawed into eight-foot lengths for the project.

The ancient trail was abandoned around this time, and a new dirt track graded upon the west section line, today's Kalamazoo Avenue. Even in modern times, though, a few portions of the Indian path survive. Downtown's Monroe Center, State Street, and Kalamazoo between Alexander and Twenty-eighth Street, all follow along its route.

We can't be sure who first built a home and lived on the hill near the spring. Too many early records have been lost. A Kent County map from 1855 indicates that people named Andrews owned the land, with one house near the old trail and another one west of the new road. But on a similar 1863 county map, these buildings aren't shown. Federal

censuses from 1850 and 1860 list no Andrews living in the township. Records do show that in November of 1864, Robert and Eliza Andrews of Bristol, Rhode Island, sold their eighty acres on section twenty-one to a man named Charles Weinberger. He doesn't appear to have kept it long.

The family destined to shape the land's development for over half a century was rooted in the earliest pioneer days of western Michigan. Back in May of 1835, a young Canadian couple and their small daughter had come down Grand River in an Indian canoe, to become the second white family to settle at Grand Haven. Nathan Throop, a carpenter by trade, later owned a sawmill and opened the village's first inn. His wife, born Mary E. Munshaw, was descended from a Pennsylvania Dutch (German) family of Loyalists who'd gone to Canada after the Revolution. She was noted for her generous hospitality and kindly, unselfish ways.

In 1850, the year of Nathan's death, their daughter Caroline had married Francis B. Gilbert, a rising businessman who moved his family to Grand Rapids five years later. Frank and his brother Thomas (whose bronze bust now stands in Veterans' Memorial Park) grew rich, founding the local gas company and the City National Bank, among other interests. They also built the big house on Cherry Street, known today as Morris Manor, where Frank's widowed mother-in-law came to live with them in 1863.

After Caroline Gilbert, only thirty-eight, died in the summer of 1869, her mother may have felt a need to strengthen ties with her family in Canada. Whatever her reason, early the next year Mary Throop purchased the eighty-acre Paris Township farm on section twenty-one, plus a forty-acre plot just east of it, three miles out in the country from the Hall Street city limits. And to live there and work the land, she brought from Ontario her youngest brother, Lambert Thomas Munshaw.

Lambert, a vigorous farmer of forty-seven in 1870, moved his wife Elizabeth and several of their nine children into their snug new five-room home. With its barns and other outbuildings, it stood back from the road, close to the spring near the hill's crest. The five daughters and four sons ranged from twenty-year-old Ella down to baby Fannie Belle (always called by her middle name), less than a year.

Judging from census records of 1870 and 1880, all of the children didn't live in the little house at any given time, boys and girls alike hiring out to work on nearby farms. Those at home naturally helped with raising crops and stock. In season, the younger ones attended the one-room wooden school at Bowen Station. This was a whistle-stop hamlet of less than a dozen buildings around Forty-fourth Street, where the new Michigan Central Railroad tracks crossed the Kalamazoo road, a half-mile south of the farm.

Two years after the Munshaws' arrival, the oldest daughter Ella married a neighboring farmer, John Shear. Sadly, she died of tuberculosis, age twenty-five, only three years later. Her next sister Minnie (1852-1916) also knew tragedy, married at twenty-three to a young man named Cole, and then widowed at twenty-six.

A picture of the Munshaw homestead drawn in 1876 for the county atlas shows a flourishing, busy farm, rich in crops and animals, a full generation removed from the frontier. That June, Mary Throop died at age sixty-four in her son-in-law's Grand Rapids home. The old pioneer left her hundred and twenty acres to Lambert and Elizabeth for life, to be afterward divided among their sons. By this time Lambert had added land adjoining his sister's original purchase on the south, doubling his acreage to a total of two hundred and forty. In later years, he sold this southern portion to his two younger sons, retaining only Mary's bequest.

Almost all the young Munshaws married during the eighteen-eighties. Two of the younger sisters, Anna (1864-1915) and Olive (1866-1941), both had their weddings before they were twenty-one. Of the sons, David (1854-1937) and his wife Clara had three boys, but only the last-born, Earl, lived to adulthood. Simcoe (1857-1932) and the former Emma Robinson had two sons and a daughter. So did Lambert Fulton (1859-1931) and Edith, their little girl dying in infancy. Youngest brother Columbus (1861-1937) -- who preferred being known as "C. H." -- had one daughter with Minnie Langdon after their marriage in 1888. Minnie's father Samuel, a widower who lived across the road the next farm south, married C. H.'s widowed sister Minnie that same year. Thus, Minnie Langdon became Minnie Munshaw, and the former Minnie Munshaw became Minnie Langdon, probably confusing the neighbors.

And then there was Belle. Still single in her mid-twenties, Lambert and Elizabeth's youngest daughter seemed at first to be the family's career girl. A cheerful, determined and energetic young woman, she also was ahead of her time. She had always excelled at Bowen School in the elegant Spencerian penmanship of the day. So, in an era when female office workers were still a novelty, Belle became an assistant with the Kent County Register of Deeds.

But her life took a new turn in 1896, thanks to a young woman named Nellie Pew. Nell insisted that her new friend Belle meet her uncle -- really more like an elder brother, she said -- the city's newly elected Clerk of Police Court, Albert Afton Carroll.

"Ab" Carroll was in his mid-thirties, a powerful, thick-muscled man with a striking black mustache and a colorful background. Born Albert Pickel in Iowa around the start of the Civil War, he'd been orphaned at seven and raised in Michigan lumber camps by his older half-brother, Frank Carroll, whose name he took. Starting in 1875, when Ab

was fourteen and Nell a small child, Frank ran the notorious Boulevard saloon and hotel, the “halfway house” between downtown Grand Rapids and Reeds Lake, outside the Eastern Avenue city limits. The building still stands at 953 Cherry SE.

“Anything goes” was the reputation of this roadhouse: booze, gambling, cockfights, wrestling, boxing, even prostitution. Officially employed as a porter, the husky, fast-growing youth actually served mostly as bouncer or bartender. And, as part of the entertainment, the fighting skills young Ab had developed in the camps made him a great favorite in boxing and wrestling bouts while still in his teens. He took pride in never having been knocked off his feet.

But despite growing up in such rough surroundings, Ab neither drank nor smoked. He gained respect among men of all social classes for his integrity and athletic powers, and their friendship for his blunt, engaging personality. Popular with the sporty young set of his generation, he became a champion rower for the swank Owashtanong Boat Club in his twenties.

In 1890, with the city about to annex and shut down the Boulevard, Frank Carroll traded the place for a Florida orange grove. Ab went south with his brother’s family and spent a couple of years operating a two-masted schooner, hauling supplies for the coastal railroad then being built. By the time frost wiped out the orange-growing enterprise in 1892, he had money enough to bring everyone back to Grand Rapids, where he went to work as manager of an ice company. But his real career lay just ahead.

At the Kent County Jail that year, Sheriff Ike Lamoreaux was fighting chaos. Rebellious prisoners were making a mockery of discipline, and deputies who dared venture into the cell block found themselves jeered or even beaten. Desperate, the sheriff hired Ab Carroll as his new turnkey. The day he first stepped in to confront the rowdies,

the bull-necked young fighter had to lick seven attackers. Within two months he'd turned the jail into a model of decorum, simply by being tougher than the toughest crooks.

When Lamoreaux's term ended, his successor tried to replace Carroll, but quickly begged him to come back -- and both sheriffs were Democrats, while Ab was a lifelong Republican. As one reporter said, "He ruled the county jail like the great warlords of Europe rule their armies."

As a deputy, he also was called on to help the sheriff's force in field operations from time to time, displaying a natural aptitude for police work. He once survived being shot at, wrestling the pistol from his assailant's hand, and later acquired the gun for a souvenir. His growing proficiency soon combined with his popularity to develop in him a taste for politics. At thirty-five, he made his first successful run for office, as Clerk of Police Court.

And then one day, his brother's daughter said, "Ab, I want you to meet the woman you're going to marry," and introduced him to Belle Munshaw.

Nell was like a kid sister to Ab. He had paid her way through finishing school in Wisconsin (where she'd met *her* husband, Robert Pew), and the affection between them was deep but without a trace of pretension. He brushed off her playful prophecy, muttering a gruff "The hell you say!" Then he had a good look at the attractive young Miss Munshaw.

She stood nearly as tall as himself, with a nice figure, brown hair, fair complexion, pert nose, and frank blue-green eyes. Changing his mind at once, he asked her for a date.

Belle's proper Victorian family was aghast -- "A prizefighter!" -- but she had a mind of her own. Ab was handsome, dressed well and drove fine horses. He took her to a dance at the village hotel in Ada, where four drunks tried to crash the party. At the

proprietor's request, Ab tried to discourage the intruders politely, but when they got belligerent, he flattened all four. Then, as if there'd been no interruption, he gently asked Belle for the next dance. His potent combination of strength and tenderness completely won her heart.

And we can be sure that she was there for him, and for Nell, when his half-brother and father figure, Frank Carroll, died at fifty-two that summer.

They were married on October 21, 1896, with over a hundred guests present. The setting was their first house, on James Avenue, which Ab had just bought and would own for life. From that day forward, he credited his every achievement in the world to Belle. She tutored him in reading and writing, making up for the scanty education he'd had as a boy, and he became an avid reader with an extensive personal library. And always she supported his career.

"A good many times in my various positions, I have been ready to give up because I thought the task before me was too big for me to handle," he once said. "Then I would go home, and she was there waiting for me, always cheerful and sympathetic, but so full of determination that I dared not quit."

With his children all grown and married, and his name well-known throughout Kent county after over a quarter-century, Lambert T. Munshaw died at his farm on May 31, 1897, age seventy-four. As per Mary Throop's will, the estate was divided into four thirty-acre strips running east to west. Simcoe Munshaw inherited the northernmost. David, as eldest, received the next strip south, with the house and farm buildings. Lambert F. got the next share, and C. H. attached the southern strip to his farm which fronted on Forty-fourth Street, making a T-shaped parcel that remained in his family for many years.

David, Clara and ten-year-old Earl moved into the homestead with the widowed Elizabeth, and spent the next decade farming. Earl attended the Bowen School -- a newer wooden building than the one his aunts and uncles had known -- and later went to high school in the city, graduating with Central High's class of 1905. Though the boy learned agriculture, his ambitions were for the legal profession. His senior year, he won the school's oratory contest, then represented Grand Rapids at the Peninsular Oratorical Convention in Ann Arbor.

Earl W. Munshaw was destined for a distinguished career with a tragic end. After getting his degree at the University of Michigan, he built a fine law practice, had a family, and became active in local Republican politics. Elected county prosecutor in 1924, he served two terms. In 1932 he polled his party's biggest majority in that year's state Senate election, and never failed to get re-elected.

Then, in the early nineteen-forties, when political boss Frank McKay was under investigation for criminal activities, Earl was called to testify. In December of 1944, he was found dead in the garage of his Victorian country house on Kalamazoo Road, just south of the old family farm where he had spent his youth. Some gossips whispered that he'd taken his own life to avoid disgrace. Others, also with no evidence, hinted that McKay had him silenced.

But all that lay in the future. While Earl was away at the university, his Aunt Belle and her family were thriving. Little Elizabeth Ann, born in early 1899, was a bright, attractive only child, and Ab's career was in the ascent. After his second term as police court clerk, he'd become manager of the Century Fuel Company. The money was good, but politics had gotten into Ab's blood, and he knew he'd found his vocation in law enforcement. After one unsuccessful try at the nomination for county sheriff, he'd easily

won election with his next attempt in 1904. The Carrolls had rented out their James Avenue house and lived at the Kent County jail, where Belle ran the kitchen. She won the awed respect of the prisoners for her fine cooking, her organization of female prisoners for productive work, and her efforts to improve sanitary conditions in the cellblocks.

In those days, the county paid its sheriffs on a fee system, with a set amount for each function performed, each prisoner boarded, each document served, and so on. With the efficiency that typified them both, the couple carried out their duties so well that by the end of Ab's first term in office, they were genuinely shocked to find they'd put aside savings totaling nearly ten thousand dollars. In modern terms the sum would equal close to a quarter-million, and Ab declared that it was downright immoral for a public service position to be so profitable. He actually petitioned to have a flat salary system put into place for his second term.

His political friends had already started talking him up for Grand Rapids' next chief of police, even before his re-election in 1906, but Ab knew and respected Chief Harvey Carr from occasions when their two departments had worked together to fight crime. He refused to consider the job until Carr might choose to retire. In the meantime, it seemed that perhaps two terms as sheriff were enough, and Ab decided not to run again in 1908. Ready to try a new direction in life, the Carrolls looked to Belle's girlhood farm.

Around the end of 1907 the three eldest Munshaw brothers, David, Simcoe and Lambert, all sold their thirty-acre plots to their brother-in-law. In the March 7, 1908 issue of the *Evening Press*, an article on the business page mentioned a trend among prominent local men to build country houses for themselves, and announced: "One of the latest to turn to this type for a permanent residence is Sheriff Carroll, who owns a ninety-acre tract of land on the Kalamazoo road about one mile [two, actually] beyond the city limits.

“The architect has all but completed the plans for the homestead and the outbuildings, and these being built this year will probably represent an investment of \$10,000 before Mr. Carroll completes the work. The residence will be of frame in the colonial type, a big, rangy home with all the modern conveniences and some of which a few years ago would not have been comprehended when a country home was being considered.”

At least the new mansion would boast piped-in well water and a septic system. The old Munshaw home, which was kept behind it for tenant quarters, never was to get indoor plumbing in all its eighty-plus years of existence. With David’s family moved to Burton Heights and mother Elizabeth staying with the Langdons, it served as a bunkhouse while the new house was being built.

Workers would arrive at the farm with their tools each Monday morning, not getting home until Saturday afternoon. At first, when the family’s flock of ducks quacking under the windows kept the men awake all night, there nearly was a mutiny. The foreman had to go into town and appeal to Belle, who came out and penned up the wandering waterfowl.

All the elements -- the land, the people, the materials and artisans -- were finally in place for the estate that would be known to a future time as Colonial Acres.

II

The three-story mansion which rose on the former Munshaw farm during that summer of 1908 might have looked more typical on a street in the city's affluent hill district. Ab felt that Belle had earned the money for it as much as he had, and her vision of an ideal home was the strongest influence on its design. She ordered its four tall Doric columns from Georgia, where the ante-bellum Greek revival style was a tradition. With its interior finished in oak, its large reception hall, library and sun porch downstairs, its five bedrooms above, steam heat, fireplaces in the living room and master bedroom, quarters for two female servants, and a spacious ballroom on the third floor, it offered style and comfort rare for a farmhouse.

The old outbuildings were improved as well. Besides the manor and tenant houses, the refurbished farm included barns, toolhouse, icehouse, chicken coops, hog pens and stock sheds. On the last day of his term as sheriff, December 31, 1908, Ab had already moved his family out of their jailhouse apartment, and was reported in the *Press* to be out at the farm, putting in a hard day's work on his new barn.

This may have been the barn that replaced the one mentioned in a story family members told to illustrate the partnership between Ab and Belle. Soon after they acquired the farm, she worried when she noted that one of the barns was uninsured, but Ab protested that they couldn't spare the money just yet. Not long afterward, lightning struck that barn, and it burned to the ground. Staring dejectedly at the ruins, Ab told his wife, "I'm so sorry, honey. You were right. That barn should have been insured."

"Don't worry," she said quietly. "It was."

For landscaping, the Carrolls hired Eugene Goebel, the city's Superintendent of Parks and Cemeteries from 1905 to 1928. Among Goebel's other creations are included

the layouts of John Ball Park, Sunshine Sanitarium, and Blythfield Country Club. To enhance Ab and Belle's new country estate, he designed a setting of remarkable charm.

Inside twin gateposts topped with lanterns, a curving gravel drive lined with shrubbery led to the house. Two handsome maple trees flanked the portico, setting off its whiteness with rich green in summer and dazzling red-orange in autumn. A row of three graceful willows fronted the road, while oak, walnut, hickory, fruit trees and flower beds decorated the lawn. Gardens with a grape arbor extended to the rear. South of the huge yard, a beautiful apple orchard went in, eight acres with over eighty trees. The rest of the acreage was given to gently rolling fields, woodlands and a creek running through a ravine. There Ab could enjoy his favorite sport, hunting in autumn. The new Carroll place was described in print as "one of the prettiest in the southern part of the county."

For the elderly Elizabeth Munshaw, moving into the big house with her daughter's family, it must have been amazing to see how the old homestead had changed since she'd first come to it nearly forty years before. With her son Lambert, evidently separated from his wife, moved into the old house and boarding two farmhands, and several of her other children living in the neighborhood, the matriarch spent her final years as the beloved center of her family circle.

Ab and Belle no doubt hosted plenty of Munshaw relatives, as well as receiving guests from town when family members entertained at formal or informal gatherings. Automobiles now made the countryside more easily reached via the graveled Kalamazoo Road, so Belle's woman friends and playmates for young Libby were able to enjoy visits. The upstairs ballroom was the scene of charming children's parties which the little girl would remember fondly all her life.

One of Ab's more notable dinner parties for his friends was held on June 27, 1910. The dining room that evening saw seated around the table a group of men representing some of the major political and financial powers of Grand Rapids. There were bank presidents William H. Anderson and Robert Graham, banker and former *Grand Rapids Herald* publisher Eugene D. Conger, and prominent lawyer George Clapperton. Businessman and former mayor W. Millard Palmer was present, as was street railway magnate Benjamin S. Hanchett, and *Herald* editor (not to mention future US Senator) Arthur H. Vandenberg. The guest of honor was Grand Rapids capitalist, *Herald* owner and current Senator in Washington, the Honorable William Alden Smith. The roughneck boy from the Boulevard saloon truly had come a long way.

His friendship with Senator Smith led Ab Carroll to a small role in the legendary *Titanic* disaster a couple of years later. Late one April night in 1912, the telephone at the farm rang. The Western Union office in town told Ab that a telegram from Washington requested that he come to the Capital at once. Smith had just been appointed chairman of a new Senate committee to investigate the *Titanic* sinking, and he needed a team of men he could trust to gather information. Carroll packed a suitcase and caught the next train east.

Within forty-eight hours he and his partner, a deputy U.S. marshal, were at work. Rushing to New York City, they met arriving ships carrying survivors and interviewed people with first-hand information. Later creative works based on the *Titanic*, even to this day, have drawn their research in part from facts recorded by the ex-sheriff of Kent County.

The stories he gathered were hot news for the New York press, and Ab had plenty of chances to sell out his findings for big money, but reporters got nothing from him. He

kept his material to himself and delivered it in confidence to the congressional committee. Then, his part of the investigation finished, he returned home to his work on the farm.

Not long after, on the morning of June 18, 1912, Elizabeth Munshaw died, age eighty-one, on the land where she had spent more than half her life. Her funeral was held in the big house two days later. She passed from the scene just about two years too soon to see her son-in-law reach the summit of his career.

Early in the summer of 1914, word went around that Chief Carr of the Grand Rapids Police Department was planning to resign after twenty-two years. Carr himself confirmed the report and urged Ab Carroll to “jump into the race” for the job. This was the chance Ab had been waiting for, but he felt that, on the record at least, he had to make clear that his influential friends should not bring pressure to bear on his behalf with the city’s Board of Police and Fire Commissioners, who were in charge of the appointment.

“I don’t intend to have any political strings trailing out of the past,” he declared. In his heart he must have been passionately eager for the position, but he told reporters, “I don’t need it so badly that I would take it on any but foot-free conditions. The wife and I have this little farm out here, and we’ll manage to struggle along a few years without any job.” People who had seen the “little farm” may have smiled.

The Police and Fire board picked Albert A. Carroll from a field of twelve candidates to be Grand Rapids’ ninth Superintendent of Police on Friday, July 3, 1914. The following Monday, the new chief was at his desk, ready to take up his duties.

There was a lot to be done. For the next few months, Ab was on the job day and night, learning the intricacies of the department, studying police methods of other cities and making initial steps toward reorganization. Long hours went into sifting through ideas, keeping the best of the old system while seeking better new procedures. His goal

was to modernize the GRPD to meet the challenges of twentieth-century law enforcement.

He banned “third degree” interrogations, preferring the challenges of getting information from suspects without resorting to abuse. Anyway, officers said, a piercing gaze from the chief’s sharp brown eyes was enough to shake most crooks out of trying to lie in answer to his probing questions. No human ever had an easy time lying to Ab Carroll.

Eight months into the job, Ab lost his best detective, red-haired John Halloran, who resigned to start his own private investigation agency. Halloran had recently solved the notorious Thomson Jewelry Store murder case, gaining sudden national fame. Chief Carroll liked him and wished him well, but his departure was a setback to the process of developing a first-class detective bureau. The task of selecting and training competent men was an ongoing one.

Standing beside the chief every step of the way was Belle. “That wife of mine is one in a million,” he remarked around this time. “She is with me in everything I do. It don’t make any difference whether it is out on our farm or down here in the police department. And when some problem comes up that things don’t look the brightest, she is always there with a word of cheer and advice. She does not know what failure means....”

His first autumn as superintendent, the Carrolls moved back into their house on James Avenue, both to be closer to Ab’s office in the downtown police station, and because their daughter was ready to start high school in town, at Central. For the rest of the years while the farm remained in the family, their annual routine was to be one of spending summers in the country, winters in the city.

The arrangement seems to have been a perfect one for young Elizabeth Ann Carroll. A child of nine when she'd first moved to the farm, she had grown to become a vivacious teenager, nicknamed "Libs" by her friends. At Central High, her striking brunette good looks and outgoing personality made her a favorite among her classmates.

In her spare time she enjoyed playing tennis with her boy and girl pals. She joined the College Club, a social group for young ladies with interests tending to intellectual uplift and service, and was elected for two terms as its treasurer. She represented her homeroom on the school paper for a semester. Becoming very active in the Sock And Buskin drama club, she was twice its vice-president, and acted in her senior year, among other parts, the female romantic lead in its annual play. When the College Club girls staged a musical extravaganza called "Biff Bang" to benefit French war orphans in the fall of 1917, Libs' performance was another star in her crown. To top it all, she was voted most popular girl in the class of '18. Her senior picture in the yearbook bore the motto, "A Generous Friend".

But the most important event of her high school career came in her freshman year, when she met a wavy-haired young man named William Arthur O'Donald. Bill was a junior who'd come from Howard City, where his family was prominent. "My mother met my father when she was fourteen, and fell in love, and never changed," one of their sons said many years later. Ab and Belle, who might have been expected to look askance at such youthful commitment, soon recognized its seriousness and came to be very fond of Bill. He had a natural inclination toward agriculture, much more than Ab himself, and the idea of a future son-in-law who might take over the farm someday may have had its attractions.

After his Central graduation in 1916, Bill studied at Michigan Agricultural College (now Michigan State University), keeping close touch with his girl in Grand Rapids. After the United States entered World War I, he volunteered for the Navy and was accepted. There were no immediate vacancies the training program, so Bill was put to serve on ore carriers sailing the Great Lakes. His long stretches at sea made him miss several openings, and the war ended before he could train for combat. Libs must have felt relieved.

The Carroll-O'Donald wedding on August 6, 1919, at First Methodist Church was a noted social event of that season. The church decorations, with masses of red and pink gladiolas, the bride's attendants dressed in organdies of pastel pink, green, blue and yellow, all combined to make the evening ceremony "unusually beautiful," as the *Herald* remarked. Aunt Nell Carroll Pew, who had introduced Ab and Belle, came in from her mansion near Toledo with her oil company executive husband and four daughters, one of them a bridesmaid. While she visited in Grand Rapids, several old friends entertained Nell, and her sister-in-law gave a ladies' luncheon out at the farm. Both women must have reflected with satisfaction on the enduring results of Nell's long-ago matchmaking

After a brief honeymoon, the young couple moved to Howard City, where Bill spent the next few years running the farm he and his sister had inherited from their father. But as time went by, gradually influenced by his wife and mother-in-law, he grew less inclined to farming than he had been. Libs had found that she preferred living in the city, and her skill at suggesting ideas so subtly that they seemed spontaneous became legendary in family folklore. (Later in life, after a business career, Bill would successfully operate a farm near Moline, and still later would raise chickens in Arizona.)

For Ab Carroll, the war had meant added challenges for his department. In Grand Rapids, as throughout the nation, patriotism sometimes overflowed among the citizens into a paranoid obsession with security. Besides regular police business, there were spy scares, reports of disloyalty, and occasional vigilante actions against innocent persons to be dealt with. After prohibition of alcoholic beverages became the law of Michigan in the summer of 1918, a running fifteen-year battle with bootleggers began. The GRPD had to coordinate its efforts with state and federal authorities in many cases.

The chief coped with it all in his own vigorous fashion. Like anyone in his position, he made political enemies as well as enthusiastic supporters, and there were clashes with such local power brokers as Frank McKay, among others. Another obstacle he had to face was some city commissioners' reluctance to back his innovations in the department at budget time. Whether it was tear gas equipment, radio communication gear, better automobiles, or modern uniforms, the story was the same. Ab's grandson, Richard O'Donald, has written, "In practically every police improvement during his term of office, he would have to fight the city commission to get it."

One of his bitterest battles was over the hiring of the first African-American officers on the force in 1922. Because Grand Rapids then was composed of various ethnic neighborhoods, Ab believed that an effective policing method was to assign patrolmen of compatible ethnicity to various beats. Polish, Dutch and Italian areas, for example all had officers of similar origins in them who could be relied on to interact well with citizens.

But when the chief proposed to hire two qualified black men, Walter Coe and Reuben Smith, racists on the commission put up furious resistance. Ab had to bring all his power to bear for the appointments to be made. (Coe, a man of great competence, was to have a successful thirty-five year career with the department, rising to captain before his

death.) There is no solid evidence, but events that followed may have grown from anti-Carroll rancor over the episode.

What is certain is that just two months after Coe and Smith joined the force, a headline in the *Grand Rapids Herald* on September 25, 1922 announcing, “CHIEF CARROLL SELLS FINE RURAL RESIDENCE TO OUTDO POLITICIANS” took the town by surprise. The story reported that, in response to someone’s bringing up a little-noticed rule requiring members of the police force to be city residents, the chief was selling the family farm to his former associate, detective John Halloran.

“For some time,” the *Herald* said, “interests inimical to the present department administration are said to have planned to raise the technical question whether a chief of police should legally reside outside the city limits and leave the city without first obtaining city hall sanction. The chief has been spending his summers, when not occupied in official duties, at his country home, living at his home on James Avenue in the winter.

“Rather than permit alleged aspirants to the chief’s job to launch an attack on the basis of the legal points and to avoid such a situation as would require him to ask city heads where he might sleep, the chief is said to have decided to relinquish the property.” The paper guessed the value of the estate around fifty-five thousand dollars.

But in the next day’s *Grand Rapids Press*, Chief Carroll rebutted the story, declaring in his statement that “absolutely no political considerations influenced the sale... The city ordinance says a member of the police force must have his residence in the city, but it does not say he cannot live outside the city in the summer time.” In fact, he pointed out, he had earlier bought twelve acres across Kalamazoo Road just to the north, and planned to build a bungalow there in the future so he could enjoy the pleasures of rural life in summer without the work and expense of keeping up a large country estate.

“I had been holding this [ninety-acre] property for my daughter and her husband, William O’Donald,” he said. “My son-in-law has just completed a course at Michigan Agricultural College, and I told him I would give him this farm should he desire it, but he has decided not to take up farming.” As to the *Herald* speculation over money, “The price was as much exaggerated as the other charges.”

And that was all the public announcement that the land which had been held within the Munshaw-Carroll clan for fifty-two years was passing into other hands. Family members today believe that both reasons given for the sale were equally true. Either one alone might not have been enough to persuade Ab and Belle to part with their place, but both of them together were.

Albert A. Carroll continued to run the Grand Rapids Police Department with what a local historian who knew him called “tireless, thorny and efficient autocracy” until 1935, admired as a “policeman’s policeman” by his men. There was one final battle when pro-McKay political foes planned to force his retirement, but Earl Munshaw tipped off Uncle Ab, who eventually fought all the way to the state Supreme Court and won. Then, having reaffirmed the principles of the civil service system (and having showed ‘em once more that he couldn’t be knocked down), he gracefully retired at his own chosen time.

Ab and Belle never did build on their twelve acres near the old farm. Instead, they fell in love with an forty-acre tract out northeast on Michigan Street, which became their new country home. They enjoyed the place, always. They -- or rather Belle -- also owned and maintained several other houses for rental over the years. And they loved their first home on James, where they were living when Ab died suddenly on January 25, 1941. (Belle lived until September of 1955, spending her last years with her daughter’s family in Arizona, and the O’Donalds, sweethearts to the end, passed away three months apart in

1968.) But, despite Ab's continuing friendship with John Halloran, none of the family ever again visited the beautiful white house on Kalamazoo Road.

There would have been just too much regret at having left.

III

For John M. Halloran, it was grand to be living in the country again.

He had been born and raised near the small village of Moline, just over the Allegan county line. It was only a dozen miles, yet a world away from the elegance of his new home. At twenty he'd come into the city, leaving his large, poor family of brothers and sisters and his saintly Irish immigrant mother who headed the clan. Now he could stand proudly on his own ninety acres, his colonial mansion, as white and pretty as a wedding cake, a solid testament to his rise in the world.

When he had joined the Grand Rapids Police Department in the fall of 1895, anyone might have guessed him to be just an ordinary redheaded young Irish cop, but there was more to him than met the eye. At the turn of the century, he'd earned a footnote in local history as the city's first policeman assigned to catch speeding automobiles, chasing down violators on a bicycle. In 1908 he'd been promoted to the detective bureau, giving his best talents a chance to shine. From the start, he'd brought a real flair to criminal investigations.

His big break had been the Thomson Jewelry Store case in September of 1913, when a pair of gunmen robbing the store on Monroe Avenue killed three men. The jeweler's insurance company hired the famous Pinkerton agency, and offered to pay travel expenses for a Grand Rapids policeman to help.

Handed the assignment, John had set out on a cloak-and-dagger manhunt that would have done credit to any detective fiction. The trail led to Toledo, Ohio, where holdup men were known to fence their loot. Staying in a cheap hotel under an alias, he prowled the city's toughest dives, checking out clues.

After locating the stolen diamonds at a pawnshop, he traced one of the murderers to Newport, Kentucky, knocked him out with a pair of brass knuckles -- “Something told me not to shoot him,” he always said afterward -- and brought him back for trial. The other bandit later was wounded in a crowded Boston restaurant, after killing the police inspector who tried to arrest him, and committed suicide in jail. John Halloran came out of the case with a popular reputation for first-class sleuthing and a taste for being his own boss.

In February of 1915, he'd tendered his resignation to Chief Carroll and set up in private business as Halloran's National Detective Agency. Within three years, his firm had grown to be the largest in the state, employing scores of operatives and bringing in six-figure annual revenues. In 1918 the city of Detroit offered him the job of police chief, but John knew he'd found his true calling and wanted no other. To be a private eye, and one of the best, was enough.

And in the autumn of 1922, as he moved his family from their small house on southeast Thomas Street out to their new country estate, John Halloran was a man who had arrived at the top of his profession. Life was good.

He was fifty-two but looked younger, his hair still auburn and his jaw still firm. Unlike the nonsmoking teetotaler Ab Carroll, he was a man who enjoyed big cigars, an occasional drop of spirits, and the social conviviality of the Elks' Club.

His wife, Josephine Miller Halloran, was a pretty, dark-haired, sweet-tempered woman, eleven years younger than himself. They had been married since 1909. Josie was a fine mother to his three children, even though only ten-year-old Kenneth was hers. Lionel and Grace, sixteen and fifteen respectively, had been born to his first wife, who'd

died soon after the daughter's birth. Neither child could remember any mother except their step-parent, and both loved her as their own.

She was a skilled housekeeper as well, doing most of her own work where Belle had always employed a hired girl or two. While the children were young, a maid named Wilda Morgan helped out around the big house, but after they were grown their mother took care of everything herself. As it had been under the Carrolls, the farm work was handled by a series of tenant farmers who lived in the old house out back. The identities of those who tilled the land during these years have not survived on record.

It may have been Josephine who came up with the idea that the family's new place should have a name. Or perhaps John felt that naming the estate would give an added touch of style to their new life, a distinction like the local wealthy folk who gave their country homes titles such as Edward Lowe's "Holmdene" or A. D. Rathbone's "Eastover" in East Grand Rapids. Whichever family member thought of it, in the early 'twenties the words "COLONIAL ACRES" went up on the side of the barn facing Kalamazoo Road, big white letters standing out from the red background like a proclamation.

The name also would appear from time to time in local society columns, as when the *Herald* noted in late 1925, "Mrs. John M. Halloran is opening her home, Colonial Acres, for a musicale and coffee, Tuesday, December 28, benefiting Marywood." The Hallorans being Catholic, many of the social activities Josie involved herself with were connected with the Church. She and John also gave other entertainments over the years, among them several dances in the third-floor ballroom with hired professional bands.

Certainly the countryside was a good place for children. There were horses to ride, fields and woods to explore, the ravine with its stream flowing into Plaster Creek. The family had several pets over the years, the best-remembered being two big chow dogs.

Though the personalities of the three Halloran youngsters contrasted, they all got along well. Lionel, energetic and earnest, resembled his father, with red hair, straight brows above blue eyes and wide, firm mouth. Grace, also a blue-eyed redhead, was more calm and quiet than her brothers -- "laid back," to use a later generation's phrase. Kenneth, still a child beside his teenage elders, was a high-spirited, outgoing and popular boy. He looked more like his mother, with dark hair and brown eyes, but in his face you could see some of the Halloran side as well.

During the first years the family lived at the farm, Lionel went to high school in town at Central, motoring in each morning with his father. The long commute may have explained why he took part in no extracurricular activities. He graduated in 1925, and continued his education at Grand Rapids Junior College. Grace went to boarding school at Nazareth Academy in Kalamazoo, and later graduated from the Mercy Central School of Nursing in 1930. Kenneth attended Bowen Station School through eighth grade (the 1905-vintage cement block building), then Godwin High School, some two miles west of home.

The nineteen-twenties passed into the nineteen-thirties at Colonial Acres in a comfortable round of work, school, friends, family life and the enjoyment of country living. The biggest physical change came in 1927, when the county replaced the gravel of Kalamazoo Road with two-lane concrete pavement, from Burton Street all the way out to Bowen Station. On Sundays the family could drive in to attend St. Stephen's Church, where they'd belonged since its establishment in 1924, in dust-free comfort. Weekdays, John drove to his office in the Grand Rapids Savings Building (now the People's Building at 60 Monroe Center), though sometimes he might have to be away for several days, when he'd visit other cities to give personal attention to one case or another.

There were plenty of clients to keep life interesting during these years. "I'm basically a crime man," he liked to say, and his favorite cases were those with criminals to be found. Some of the most entertaining (along with the majority, which were routine civil affairs) can never be told, because John was careful to preserve professional confidentiality, and the records have been destroyed. The case he could talk about which would have been his most exciting, he always said, never quite happened.

While passing through Minneapolis in early 1934, he ran into an old contact with under-world connections. The two men talked for a while, and then his acquaintance introduced Halloran to a couple of other shady types, who ended up making an offer. "It was some proposition," he liked to recall. "For twenty thousand dollars each, they said they could deliver John Herbert Dillinger to the FBI. They wanted me as a go-between with the federal officers." He contacted J. Edgar Hoover and outlined the deal, but after considering, Hoover turned it down. Too uncertain, he said, too nebulous. "A few months later they got Dillinger anyway -- and a lot cheaper," John would end his story. History relates that the famous gangster was shot dead outside a Chicago theater with help from a female informant, and unfortunately, no part in all the excitement for John Halloran.

On the home front, by this time all the children were grown and out of school. Lionel, interested in real estate, went into his father's office, running the Halloran Realty Company and learning the detective business. He married an attractive girl named Katherine "Kay" Koets, and they lived in town, renting on the southeast side. Grace worked awhile at nursing in Detroit's Harper Hospital, but eventually came back to live at home. Kenneth also lived with his parents and went to work in a factory after high school.

This youngest son seemed to have the hardest time of the three young Hallorans. At twenty-two, he married Catherine Vanderhoff in a ceremony at St. Stephen's in the

spring of 1934. They moved into a rented house on Madison, and John gave Kenneth work as a detective at the agency. For some reason, though, nothing seemed to work out for the young man. After only about two years, he was pumping gas at the Firestone Tire service center downtown. By this time, the couple had a daughter, Barbara, but their marriage was in trouble. In 1937 they were divorced, and Kenneth left Grand Rapids for a while.

Grace was in her early thirties when she met the love of her life. Her father still had many relatives in the Moline area, and it happened while she was visiting some of them. At Green Lake with her cousins, she encountered Robert Finkbeiner, who lived nearby. Bob was three years her junior, and he wasn't a Catholic. She had more education, while he'd only finished eighth grade. But he was highly intelligent, with a keen mathematical mind. He was kind and he had a great sense of humor, doing impressions of public figures that could set everyone laughing. The relationship that quickly grew between Grace and Bob was deeply harmonious and affectionate, despite their differences.

They were married quietly on October 16, 1940, at the Catholic priest's house in Cascade, after the usual interfaith marriage arrangements. With the approach of America's involvement World War II, as manpower began to get scarce, the couple moved into the tenant house at Colonial Acres, where Bob took over the farm operations.

The imminent war seemed to put some sense of direction back into young Kenneth's life. In April of 1941, he enlisted in the army, and after his training was attached to a military intelligence section. He was stationed near Battle Creek at Fort Custer, so was able to make regular visits to his parents' home. Then he was assigned to overseas duty in Iceland with a military police battalion late in 1942.

Colonial Acres during the war may have looked a bit more time-worn than it had in the Carrolls' day. The once-precise Eugene Goebel landscape art had been let run to a more casual layout of plantings. The barn and other outbuildings were all painted white now, the estate's name no longer displayed to passersby. When Grand Rapids' street numbering system and mail delivery was extended out southeast in 1937, the house was marked number thirty-eight hundred. In 1943 it received its permanent designation, 3858 Kalamazoo SE. The decades had aged both the place and its owners, in a comfortable way.

John Halloran's hair had grown more gray than red, befitting a man in his seventies, and Josephine was silvery at the temples. There were more grandchildren to come visiting. Lionel and Kay's two, young John L. and Mary K., both were born in the late 'thirties. Grace and Bob's daughter, Mary Ellen Finkbeiner, born in 1943, was home with her parents, just a few steps away.

Bob kept as busy as other Kent County farmers, raising corn, wheat, oats, and livestock on his in-laws' acreage to feed the war effort. Lionel was now listed as manager of the detective agency as well as president of the realty company. Kay and Bob sometimes helped out as operatives on cases, doing shadowing and other detection work. Even little Mary Ellen did her part, being taken on the odd stakeout to lend credibility to Bob's cover.

After eighteen months' duty in Iceland and six months in England, Private First Class Kenneth Halloran returned to the United States in December of 1944. Assigned to Camp Davis, North Carolina, he escorted prisoners of war to their camps and aided in investigations. His father and mother were relieved that he had come home unhurt, and

with the war in Europe winding down as spring 1945 arrived, could look forward to his return to civilian life.

And then, on the last day of April, came the shocking news that Kenneth was dead.

At first there were no details. He had died on Sunday, the twenty-ninth. His last letter, dated April twenty-fifth, had mentioned nothing unusual. Only afterward did the full, sad story come to the grieving parents. In a bitter irony, the young soldier, only thirty-two, had met his death barely a week before V-E Day, not in battle but from a freak accident. A dark night, a chance misstep and fall, a fractured skull, and whatever potential future that life might still have held for Kenneth Halloran was gone forever.

His family met the baggage car carrying his body at the C. & O. railroad crossing stop on Kalamazoo Avenue north of Alger. It was a mild, drizzly spring day, but the rain let up briefly as the coffin was loaded into the hearse. Grace would remember all her life the high, mournful steam whistle of the train that brought her brother home for the last time. For two days he lay in state at the big white house which had known him since boyhood. Then on Friday, May fourth, Father Dunphy conducted Kenneth's funeral service there in the living room, before the Requiem Mass at St. Stephen's and burial in Woodlawn Cemetery.

Life, as it must, went on for John and Josephine and their family. But after the war ended, their own time at Colonial Acres was short. Were there too many memories and associations with their lost son for them to live comfortably anymore in the house where they'd raised him? Was it simply that they were getting on in years, and wanted a smaller home with less upkeep? Or were they nostalgic for the old house and neighborhood on Thomas Street, where they'd lived before moving to the country? That, anyway, was

where they decided at last to return. (Ten years later they built their last home on Hall Street SE.) Whatever the cause, in 1946 they placed the estate on the market for the first time in nearly a quarter-century.

The people who eventually bought it were a couple in their early thirties, William J. Rykse and his wife, the former Alice Heslinga. Bill had been a dealer in wholesale produce, living on the southeast side of Grand Rapids. He had no background in agriculture, but he recognized the farm as a good investment. In the spring of 1947, they moved into the main house with their sons, Melvyn and Ronald, ages ten and eight. The Finkbeiners stayed on in the tenant house, Bob continuing to lease the farming operation as he had from his father-in-law.

There is a story, handed down through later owners of his detective agency, that around this time John Halloran was under consideration in Washington for appointment as first director of the newly-created Central Intelligence Agency, but turned it down. The account seems odd, considering his age then -- seventy-seven -- but not impossible. Given the CIA's policy of secrecy, there probably is no way to verify the tale, but it underscores both the man's high professional reputation and the fact that he was a figure to whom legends attached.

John lived to be ninety-four, and Josie to ninety-two. Up until two years before his death, the old private eye could still be found regularly at his old-fashioned roll-top desk in the People's Building office, where Lionel headed the firm and its sixty-five operatives. (The son remained in charge until a few years after John died in 1964, then sold out and retired to Florida, where he lived out his life.) A 1958 *Grand Rapids Press* article called John the oldest practicing detective in Michigan, possibly in the nation.

“Big crime nowadays is left mostly to the police, except in exceptional cases,” he lamented to that reporter. “Most of our work now is civil cases. We obtain various kinds of information sometimes when fraud is suspected, but often as not, simply data which couldn’t be collected except by a private investigator working undercover.” He missed the adventurous old times. “But I’m still down here every day and I still do a turn or two as a private detective when something comes up which interests me.” And he always kept handy the brass knuckles he’d worn to knock out the Thomson Jewelry Store bandit so long ago.

A couple of years later, in a last interview with the *Detroit Free Press*, he reflected at age ninety on a long and satisfying career. The financial rewards? “Just say I’ve got enough; I don’t have to worry anymore.” And his final summing up of his own life? John Halloran smiled at the reporter.

“For a fellow who could just barely read and write, I’ve done pretty well,” he said.

IV

During its first forty years, the pace of change around the big white house had been slow and gradual, the impact relatively slight. In the post-war era, change would accelerate rapidly, transforming the estate and its surroundings from rural to urban as the city of Grand Rapids grew out to envelop the area.

As late as the spring of 1950, for example, it was an ordinary farm mishap when several pigs escaped their pen and wandered south over the fields toward Forty-fourth Street. A wild chase followed, with Bob Finkbeiner, six-year-old Mary Ellen, and everyone else around, all trying to catch the big, clumsy animals and stampede them back homeward. Only a few years later, such a scene would be not just comical, but downright impossible.

The Rykse family was the last to enjoy a rural lifestyle on the place, and even that went through changes. The sons, Mel and Ron, went to the old two-room Bowen School for just one year before Alice decided that her boys should have better educational advantages and sent them to Oakdale Christian in the city. Most of the time they were driven in, but in good weather they would ride their bikes the three miles up Kalamazoo Avenue.

No doubt the most joyous event the old house saw in the course of its first years under this family was the birth on February 15, 1948 of Sharon Rae Rykse in the front bedroom upstairs. With a growing baby, two active boys, and Mary Ellen Finkbeiner, by this time school age and available to play, it must have been a lively household in the late 'forties. Alice didn't employ live-in help, though at various times during this period she hired two different women who drove out to assist with housekeeping.

Surrounded by pastures and croplands, the farm buildings still clustered around the mansion, approaching the end of their usefulness as though nothing at all was changing around the neighborhood. And yet, change was on the way. The former Samuel Langdon farm had been platted as a residential subdivision even before the war, though very little building had been done on it until after construction materials became less scarce in peacetime. Another new development, Millbrook Estates, grew up northwest of Kalamazoo and Thirty-sixth around the same period. Other parcels of land in Paris Township were being bought up for eventual subdividing. The shape of the future was clear.

In the summer of 1950, Bob Finkbeiner -- having already sold his pigs in disgust after their "great escape" -- decided he'd had enough of farming. That July he moved with his wife and daughter to a pleasant small house in suburban Wyoming Township, where Bob and Grace lived for the rest of their lives. (He passed away in 1976, and Grace died at eighty in 1987.) There was a big auction of farm equipment, and the agricultural operation at the estate once known as Colonial Acres was leased to a non-resident manager. The old tenant house, occupied ever since baby Belle Munshaw had been carried over its threshold more than eighty years before, stood empty at last. Used for storage, it would shelter no more families.

Barney VanderLaan, the new lessee, was a landscape gardener who lived in town at 1337 Boston SE. (By coincidence, this is just two doors from where a family who would someday own the Rykse house was to live for years.) Where Bob Finkbeiner had grown a full range of farm crops, Barney concentrated on corn and hay for the animals. He kept the Belgian draft horses used to pull his heavy equipment in the white barn out on Kalamazoo Avenue. He also operated a boarding stable there, as well as feeding the

Rykse family's horses. The nearby countryside was still suitable for horseback riding along the shoulder of the road, and you couldn't quite yet see the suburbs north or south through the trees.

After having been the scene of both death and birth in its time, the big house saw its first celebration of matrimony during the Rykse years. In addition to a couple of wedding receptions held for relatives in its spacious rooms, a marriage ceremony was performed before the living room fireplace in the very early nineteen-fifties, when Bill's younger sister, Muriel Rykse, married Jack Ohlmann. These were among the few occasions when the family entertained on a large scale. The third-floor ballroom got most of its use as a play area for the children.

But the Rykse's time in the house was drawing toward its end. The opening wedge came in 1952, when William A. Duthler, a partner in the real estate firm of Simerink & Duthler, offered Bill Rykse an excellent price for the eight-acre apple orchard fronting the road. Despite Alice's reluctance, her husband felt the offer was too good to refuse. He sold to Duthler, who built a modern one-story brick house for himself on the property.

The Realtor, recognizing the land's potential attraction for developers, also began urging the Rykses to list their remaining eighty-two acres with his company. In February of 1953, Bill gave in and put the whole farm up for sale, asking forty-eight thousand dollars. It was the next year before Gerrit Heys, a market gardener who lived on Twenty-eighth Street, closed the deal that ended the land's use for agriculture. More than forty years later, long after Bill had passed away, Alice Rykse still regretted the move as the biggest mistake in her family's life.

The Rykses found a new home on the East Beltline, where Bill continued his wholesale produce business. Barney VanderLaan, his final crops harvested, took away his

horses and farming tools. Gerrit Heys, not wishing to live on the property, tore down the barn, the old Munshaw home, and all the other outbuildings except a two-story one northeast of the house, used as a four-car garage.

Holding most of the land for future development, he set aside about one and a quarter acres surrounding the mansion, which he listed for sale in September of 1954 at twenty-one thousand dollars. After several months with no serious offers, Heys leased out the house for a year. His tenant, whose name has not been recorded, rented with the understanding that real estate salesmen could show the place to prospective buyers whenever necessary.

Finally, in June of 1956, the house got its fifth owner. He was Lee W. Yothers, who had been living in town on Paris Avenue with his wife, born Winona Largen, and their three daughters. Lee had come to Grand Rapids five years before, when he'd been hired as the administrator of Ferguson-Droste-Ferguson Hospital. A veteran in his thirties, he'd taken his bachelor's degree in 1948 at Lake Forest College in Illinois, then completed graduate studies for his profession at Northwestern University in 1951.

The three little girls who came to live in the old house all shared the same initials as their father and mother: They were Winifred Lee, who was ten when the family moved in, Winona Lynn, (called by her middle name) who was five, and Wendy Lou, age three. Less than a year later, in May of 1957, a fourth daughter was born to the parents, who continued their tradition by naming her Wynette Lorraine. All of the children were educated in the Kentwood schools, where Winnie in particular was an outstanding student.

In addition to his work of running the hospital and overseeing its expansion, Lee found time to become involved in community service, becoming president in 1957 of the

Grand Rapids Exchange Club. For recreation, he and Winona were avid bridge players, entertaining friends at card parties in their home. Lee also enjoyed golf, fishing and hunting in his spare time.

As the young family grew up in the house during the late 'fifties, the surrounding neighborhood continued its own growth. To the east, the view still showed only former cropland gradually reverting to grass and weeds, a few dead cornstalks still faintly visible amid the wild vegetation and broken-down fences. But to the north, rows of smaller, modern houses now began to fill the horizon, new ones under construction each year after mid-decade on streets called Millbank, Millbrook and Eastbrook, in Brookside Estates.

Southward, the Town & Country Shopping Center, Grand Rapids' first suburban retail strip mall, had opened in November of 1954 on a triangle of land just beyond the old Langdon farmhouse. Its great popularity (at least until Rogers Plaza introduced the trend toward enclosed malls in 1960) brought increased traffic along Kalamazoo Avenue, as did the building up of the Langdon plat and other scattered housing developments springing up further south. There was also the Plymouth Congregational Church, built in 1958 where once had been the southwest corner of the Carroll farm, and a new street called Lorelee, platted near it soon after.

Grand Rapids' southern city limits had been at Burton Street when the house was built. Since 1925 they had been at Twenty-eighth Street. With the growing population in parts of Paris Township, the question of annexing the more settled areas became an issue by decade's end. The city pursued its expansion aims with a series of "Dilley annexations," named after the lawyer who represented many individual landowners petitioning to join Grand Rapids. Because opinion in various suburbs was divided, there were many legal wrangles during these years as township and city disputed the land and

tax dollars involved. One court decision allowed school district lines to be independent of political boundaries, with the effect that students currently in the Kentwood system could remain there, even if annexed.

On April 3, 1961, the tract which included 3858 Kalamazoo voted to join the city of Grand Rapids, effective the last day in June. Less than a year later, more parcels on the south and east came in. This still left pockets of Paris Township remaining surrounded by city, until adjustments to the border a few years later annexed the whole region inside a roughly four-mile square, northwest of Breton and Forty-fourth.

Winnie Yothers stayed at Kentwood rather than bussing in to Ottawa Hills. She graduated there in 1963, a member of the honor society, school paper, yearbook, girls athletic association, junior and senior plays and Latin club, and more. Her sister Lynn entered Kentwood as a seventh-grader in the fall of 1962.

The Yothers family did not remain long as residents of Grand Rapids. In 1962 Lee was offered a new job in Battle Creek, and that August the old mansion went on the market again. It was listed with Decker & Jean at thirty-four thousand dollars, but no one offered to buy. In mid-October of 1963 another Realtor, Taylor Closterhouse, re-launched the sales campaign with a well-attended open house on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. He had no better luck, even with the price lowered under thirty thousand. Probably tired of Lee's long commute, the Yotherses moved to Battle Creek at the end of the school year. That summer of 1964, they handed over the listing to Biferno Realty, again dropping the price.

While the house stood empty, its last remaining outbuilding, the big garage near the northeast corner of the lot, burned down by either accident or vandalism. The charred pile of ashes sat uncleared, while weeds grew around it. The barn foundations were

overgrown too, and nearby underbrush hid abandoned bits of junk on the ground. The absent owner kept the lawn mowed and the house secure, but during this transitional time the aging property seems to have appeared as a “white elephant” to practical house-hunters.

For another thing, the city during 1964 rewarded its new taxpayers with a rebuilt Kalamazoo Avenue, widened to four lanes, with curbs and gutters, smooth pavement and sidewalks. But the project took out the row of old trees which had fronted the road for generations, the three huge weeping willows and the tall maple and oak nearer the driveway. It left a raw, gaping sandbank at the foot of the lawn, which was shortened by over fifty feet, while the house looked strangely vulnerable and desolate after so many years behind its leafy cloak.

As months went by with the place vacant, one young man, a Grand Rapids Junior College student who had lived in the neighborhood during the early ‘sixties, grew intrigued by its aura of faded grandeur and romance. Returning from bicycle rides in the country, alone or with companions, he would sometimes pause a few minutes to walk around the deserted grounds, wondering about the home’s past. In the spring of 1965 he used it as the setting of a short story published in the college literary magazine, peopling it with imaginary characters -- an elderly artist and his family -- reacting to the actual changes. The piece, titled “Liberty Hill,” won third prize in the school’s annual writing contest and brought the youthful writer the first money earned with his craft. Many years later, he was to become the author of this history.

In real life, the old mansion’s fortunes were still fading, but about to turn. In the summer of 1965, Lee Yothers gave the listing to Simerink & Duthler, had the peeling exterior repainted, and brought down the price to twenty-seven, five. He also had small

evergreen shrubs planted to cover the eroding bank along the sidewalk. Renewing the listing six months later, he knocked off the five hundred. At last, in July 1966, with a hint of desperation, he offered the property at twenty-four thousand, only a little more than he'd paid for it ten years earlier.

Meanwhile, the rows of homes under construction had reached southward, filling Clearbrook and Stilesgate streets. Plats were surveyed and filed for the Colonial Estates, Churchill Downs and Albert Brothers Kalamazoo Avenue Plat subdivisions, to be laid out on the onetime Carroll farm. The bulldozers and cement mixers soon would be coming to transform the landscape.

One Realtor's newspaper ad even suggested that the house might best be remodeled (implied was the possibility of "removed") for commercial use, and the land rezoned. At the time, the idea was really not too far-fetched, considering the uncertain direction of the neighborhood's rapid transition.

Just a short distance south, for example, the new Grand Valley Nursing Center was open for business on the very spot where Bob Finkbeiner had once chased down his runaway pigs, only sixteen years before.

IV

At last, in an ironic twist, the old house was saved from further deterioration -- even, possibly, from destruction -- by a man who really was a reluctant savior, and by a woman who had the vision to see its potential.

This couple was Dale M. Strain, a young partner in a downtown law firm, and his wife Suzanne. They had been living in East Grand Rapids with their “his and hers” blended family of four small children. It was she who saw the ad in the *Press* for a Sunday open house, and who fell in love with the place. The kids, two boys and two girls ranging from age ten down, all would be able to have their own rooms, and so quickly caught Suzanne’s enthusiasm. Her husband, more pragmatic, saw a run-down antique that fully showed its nearly sixty years, and thought of repair bills and trouble. But he loved his family and wanted to please them, so he soon found himself talking with Realtor Bill Duthler.

One sticking point was the fact that the gravel driveway actually cut the property line on the north side, where Duthler now owned the land. He planned to eventually plat another street to run off of Kalamazoo south of the Churchill Downs entrance, which would back houses up against the mansion’s grounds right to the drive. This was never carried out, as Strain finally got an agreement to buy from him an added twenty-seven and a half feet along the boundary to give himself an adequate buffer. Dale estimated that he could sell his East Grand Rapids house for enough to cover the total purchases and necessary restoration. On September 7, 1966, the deal was made, and the new owner started hunting up contractors.

There was several months worth of work to be done before the family could move in, and it turned out to be a major reconstruction job. The Strains added a three-stall

garage on the rear. They gutted and rebuilt the kitchen, putting in a utility room and a half-bath on the first floor, and installed a bay window. A walk-in bar went in off the dining room. At the building's southeast corner they put a new foundation under the sunporch, making it over into a year-round family room. Above this they gained another upstairs room, and a bathroom went in off the master bedchamber.

The various projects stretched on into winter, and one cold Sunday the family drove up the driveway to check how things were progressing. To their horror, they found a gigantic icicle some three feet thick, hanging from the third floor down to the ground. Dale had kept the boiler fired so the empty house would have heat, but the old oil burner had gone out. The pipes had frozen, then burst on the top story, with water gushing down the wall near the stairs, both indoors and out. Wood and carpets had to be replaced, not to mention the pipes. A new, reliable natural gas burner also went into the basement.

As part of its modernization, the house was connected with the city water and sewer systems, abandoning the septic tank near the drive and the spring-fed well by the barn foundations. Outdated plumbing fixtures got replaced, and original lead pipes, which had been sealed inside the bathroom floor with cement, were laboriously chipped out. Strain Electric, owned by Dale's cousins, overhauled the wiring, putting in all new outlets. A beautiful chandelier of Czech crystal went into the dining room. The home's interior was completely redecorated with fresh paint and new carpeting.

The exterior also received some much-needed attention. Under the front porch, decaying wooden bases beneath the tall columns were replaced by concrete. When hints of dry rot showed in the columns themselves, Suzanne's father, an experienced yachtsman, came up with a solution. Holes drilled in the fluted surface were injected with a marine compound which, absorbed into the wood, hardened it to rocklike solidity.

Another problem was the built-in wooden eaves troughs, which had become leaky. After experimenting with linings of metal and plastic without success, Dale finally had them filled in.

When the Strain family at last occupied its new home in 1967, the historic place seemed like a dignified elder restored to youthful vigor. By contrast, Dale felt, his wallet had come through the experience prematurely aged, shrunken and depleted.

The yard, too, came in for its share of work. A good cleaning removed accumulated debris around the perimeter, and the surviving plants were treated to maintenance they hadn't received in a long time. There were still a few of the old apple trees and a cherry tree to perfume the spring air each year. Towering above the roofline stood the large hickory by the drive, and the two aging but stately maples like ancient sentinels guarding the portico.

Play equipment for the youngsters went into the back yard. The children, Michael and Shelly Christopher, and Sheri and Dale Strain Jr., from Suzanne and Dale's previous marriages, were joined around the time they moved into the house by their new little brother, Robert Strain. The baby was baptized in the nearby Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ. All five kids eventually attended the Kentwood public schools.

Suzanne had formerly lived in Key West, and had developed a taste for colorful pastels in the south Florida manner. After living in the mansion for a couple of years, she decided that the place should have more color -- it was, after all, the late nineteen-sixties -- and over Dale's protests had the exterior painted a pale aqua with off-white trim, the only time in its long history that it departed from the customary southern-plantation look. It was not a happy choice. "I wear the pants in my family," Dale joked to friends at the office who kidded him about the color, "and I say that that house is white!"

All around, development still went on. West across Kalamazoo, the Kimberly Park plat had been designed. Just north and east, new streets with names like Southampton, Old Town and Norwalk were laid down upon soil once cultivated by the Munshaws and the Carrolls. The first houses fronting these streets began to be erected in 1967, and as early as the decade's end, more than thirty were up and mostly occupied. The biggest construction project was Sherwood Park Elementary School, built in 1969 on what had been the old farm's "back forty," though of course it meant little to the five children except as a convenient playground.

By the time that Suzanne and Dale Strain were divorced in 1975, the neighborhood's transition from rural to residential was well advanced. Both these people deserve great credit for their rejuvenation of an aged structure that might not have been preserved if its condition had been allowed to go much further downhill. Besides updating the house, they had bought time for it to become a fixture -- an outstanding one -- in a stable, middle-class community.

The area's more settled character probably helped enhance the home's value, adding to the Strains' improvements in setting a good price for it when they came to divide up their assets. They listed it at sixty-one thousand and settled quickly for fifty-five, a fairly decent appreciation considering that it had gone in the low twenties just nine years before -- though perhaps less so balanced against all the money they'd put into it. At least, despite the inevitable wear natural to raising a large family, it had become once again a desirable piece of property. The buyer in September 1975 was G. C. "Tony" Coats, an engineer at Steelcase, Inc.

Coats and his family did not remain long enough to have much effect on the house, except that its unfortunate aqua paint job was at once replaced by traditional white.

His career led to their move to Florida after less than two years, and in June 1977 the place was up for sale again. Catching the rising real estate market, it listed at just under seventy-eight thousand, but was still vacant the following spring.

The 1979 Grand Rapids City Directory lists the home's owners as Donald Woodby and his wife Julie, who no doubt bought it during the previous year. No occupation is given for either person. They are not listed at all in the 1978 directory volume, and they are gone in 1980. Whoever the Woodbys were, their stay in town must have been a brief one.

In fact, even before the '79 directory was in print, the house had already changed hands again that spring. This time, fortunately, the new owner was into it for the long term. Daniel G. Gantos, an executive with the women's apparel store chain which his family had founded in 1932, at once began another round of remodeling. It took nearly a year of work before he and his wife Lynn could move in, but the result was a showplace.

Throughout the structure, builder David Idema replaced wood wherever the original material was becoming decayed, restoring strength and solidity. He also rebuilt the staircase. The interior walls, which had witnessed the passing lives of all the home's occupants since the Carrolls over seven decades, were laid bare down to the lath, and replastered. The woodwork, including the sliding pocket doors, was stripped and refinished. A complete new kitchen superseded the nineteen-sixties update, and both the plumbing and electrical systems came in for reworking -- one of the few fixtures to be retained was the Czech crystal chandelier in the dining room. All the antique radiators were taken out, thoroughly cleaned, and repainted before being reset in place.

Upstairs, the master bedroom with its fireplace and the bedroom adjoining toward the front were combined into one large chamber. A room once used for maid's quarters

linked up to the small bath beside it to form a big bathroom, complete with a modern Jacuzzi. Some of the second-story window glass had been broken, and the new owners painstakingly searched for old-style quarter-inch thick glass to replace it.

Because Dan's business affairs kept him occupied much of the time during the period of restoration, Lynn Gantos took the responsibility for working closely with Idema and the other contractors. She did extensive research on Greek revival architecture and decoration, striving to blend the old and the new in a way that would express both historical accuracy and personal taste. Her choices brought the beautiful inlaid marble floor in the foyer and the crown moldings throughout the first floor. Another of her innovations was the massive black marble mantel in the family room, with the old living room fireplace converted into a double-grate facing into both rooms. Central air conditioning was yet another well-chosen addition.

Even after the home was completely modernized and redecorated, and the couple had moved into it in 1980, further improvements continued. Repainting the exterior became an ongoing project, a different small section being done each year until it was time to start over at the beginning. The lawn benefited by installation of an underground sprinkling system.

And to preclude the possibility of anyone building on the two empty lots abutting the property on the north, Dan bought them, bringing the estate's size up to about three acres. There would be little future chance to add more land, as houses already stood in a solid row along Old Town Road. By the mid-nineteen-eighties, another line of homes facing West Norwalk sealed the Gantos' eastern border. Their construction wiped out the last trace of old barn foundations except a slight incline of earth that once had led up to the door.

Dan was content to let nature take its course with the plant growth on his new buffer land, but the area near the house needed attention. He hired the Poortenga Tree Service in 1984 to handle this project, which included removing some of the older, dying trees. Most notable of those to go was the big maple by the north side of the portico. James K. Poortenga, who only recently had begun operating his business full-time after years of running it as a sideline to his old job as trimmer for Consumers Power Company, personally oversaw the work. Not in remotest imagination could he foresee that someday the white mansion would be his own.

Also in 1984, Dan Gantos had Kappes Landscaping create a graceful new patio at the southeast corner of the house. Its design won a professional award. The next year's project was replacing the home's roof, which time's passage had made necessary. The year after that it was the driveway, its gravel supplanted after so many years by smooth black asphalt. And in 1987, the process of renewal reached to the structure's very base. The cellar walls had been showing signs of weakening, and when one began to collapse inward they were rebuilt, strengthened with concrete block. Dan and Lynn Gantos could at last claim to have literally restored the old house from top to bottom.

For the remaining years that the couple lived there with their two young daughters, they were able to enjoy what they had accomplished without further major investment. Dan once calculated that he had poured well over three hundred thousand dollars into the place. No one who appreciates the beauty of the house today would claim that the expense was in vain.

After Dan sold his share in the Gantos chain during the nineteen-eighties, he continued to work for the company until 1990, when he became an independent business consultant. His girls, born in 1981 and 1987, were growing up, and making time to spend

with them was an important consideration. The children's elementary schooling was done in a private Montessori institution, but as the time approached to consider middle and high school, the system that seemed most attractive for them was in the eastern suburbs. This choice led to the Gantos family's move in 1993 into a new home in the Forest Hills district.

Once again the house on Kalamazoo Avenue stood empty for a long period. After a year with no buyer, Dan attempted to make it more attractive by putting a new roof on the garage and installing a B-Dry system to eliminate basement dampness, as well as touching up the exterior paint. But still more months went by with no action. Despite all those who came to look (among them, incidentally, Mary Ellen Finkbeiner, visiting for the first time in forty-four years), the home's most regular visitors in 1994 were those hired to clean or maintain it.

Meanwhile, at the James K. Poortenga residence on Boston Street near the east city limits, he and his wife LaVonne were facing a decision. The post-World War II house where they had lived for twenty-five years, raising three sons, had grown shabby and needed major renovation. Would it be better to spend a lot of money on it, or to consider moving? Late in 1994 a suggestion from the couple's youngest son Doug, who with his wife was temporarily living near the vacant mansion, led Vonnice and Jim to arrange a tour of it.

Jim, of course, had seen the place before when doing tree work for Gantos. Years earlier, when the Poortengas had lived further west down Boston Street, he'd even known and employed Barney VanderLaan, the last person to farm old Colonial Acres. Vonnice, however, knew 3858 Kalamazoo SE only as an address to bill for services. But as they walked through its rooms with Doug and Anne one December Saturday, its classic charm

and modern luxury made a powerful impression. The following Monday they made Dan Gantos an offer, he replied with a counter-offer, and on December nineteenth the deal was closed.

It was remarkable timing, actually. After the year and a half that the place had been available, just around this time several other parties' offers for it suddenly were pending. The Poortengas' acquisition came through such a delicate chain of circumstance that one might well discern the hand of Providence bringing together this family and this home. Certainly, approaching its tenth decade, the house had found owners who would cherish, preserve and enhance it for years to come.

The Poortengas moved into their new home in mid-June of 1995. Very little remodeling was necessary, thanks to the Gantos' work. The third floor ballroom, used for years as storage space, became a play area for visiting grandchildren (four by eldest son Ken, one by second son Dan, and two by Doug, as of 1998). Shelving units in the library, hallway wallpaper more to the new owners' taste, some carpeting, a shower installed in the master bathroom -- these were about all the improvements the interior needed. Out in the yard, by contrast, Jim's expertise in landscaping brought an era of great changes.

The few gnarled apple trees that remained were taken out. Jim would have liked to save the aged maple by the portico, probably the last vestige of the original Eugene Goebel plantings, but it was too far gone and had to be removed. There was no hesitation in stripping the slope north of the drive of the soft-wooded "trash trees" that had grown up over the years. It was bad luck that, just after the earth there was laid bare, a freak thunderstorm caused a mudslide into the backyards of houses facing Old Town Drive. Jim paid the damages and had an earth berm created to prevent a recurrence, and the sequel proved to be not so unfortunate after all.

All around the estate's perimeter, a row of evergreens went in, providing shade and privacy for the Poortengas and their neighbors. Other new plantings of trees and shrubs were placed about the yard, including one of Jim's favorites, a handsome copper beech.

Despite the couple's busy lifestyle, they have always enjoyed entertaining. To handle guests' cars, asphalt parking areas were added along the driveway. These were adequate to most occasions, though the family's huge annual Christmas party always saw dozens of automobiles scattered over all the open sections of lawn.

Covering the site where the old Munshaw farmhouse once stood, a large vegetable garden bordered by flowers has been planted. In 1997 it was enclosed by a white picket fence with an arbor, and a small outbuilding added at the rear. Vonnie's full schedule made it difficult to devote very much time to gardening, so she placed it under the care of Renee Ludema, a professional garden designer. Renee also designed plantings for the front of the house, and her floral layout around the patio provided a lovely, colorful setting for outdoor dining or lounging.

The friendly relationship between Renee and the Poortengas even led to the big white house becoming the scene, in September 1996, of one more wedding. Her sister, Chantal Merizon, married Wayne VanHeest in a garden ceremony, followed by a reception indoors. In gratitude, the women's father, the noted artist Armand Merizon, presented Jim and Vonnie with one of his landscape paintings, a valued addition to the home's furnishings.

In the summer of 1998, ninety years from the time that earth was being excavated for foundations, the sound of digging once again could be heard at the old place. Having observed how the berm near the property's north border tended to collect water in wet

seasons, Jim Poortenga decided to take advantage of the fact by having a pond constructed in the swale. There would be a beach where grandchildren could swim, with an expanse of clear water that would welcome Bailey, the family dog, and the pair of pet ducks roaming the yard (their presence a coincidental reminder of those ducks who bedeviled the 1908 workmen?). The ground water which long ago fed the ancient hillside spring would find a new use for the future, enriching again the lives of those who dwell on this land.

That following year two other projects brought further change. Along the front of the property a handsome iron fence went in to protect passing children and animals from wandering too close to the pond. And near the northeast corner of the house, not far from where the big garage stood that burned in 1964, rose a new two-story carriage house, an attractive colonial-style building, designed by the architectural firm Schemata to harmonize nicely with the existing structure.

And so the changes of life go on at the three remaining “colonial” acres, as they will for as long as the house abides, one human story after another being lived out within the shelter of its walls. Estimates have been made that to re-create it at today’s costs would run well above seven hundred thousand dollars, but no price could be placed upon all the memories of its long past. Approaching the twenty-first century, it stands lovingly maintained for future generations, as steadfast and sound as the old-time lawman and his lady who built it.

For this fine old home, history is still a work in progress.

SOURCES

[Rather than have the manuscript cluttered with footnotes, most of the sources for this article are listed below. Not noted are a few brief phone queries, nor a number of newspaper articles which were researched, but provided little or no usable information not found elsewhere. One other source not mentioned is the author's personal memory of the house and its neighborhood, circa 1960-1965. Special thanks must be given here to Dan Poortenga, who assisted with the Finkbeiner and O'Donald interviews, and in general was a great help during this project.]

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