

MINDING THEIR MANOR NEW OWNERS PLAN TO RESTORE ONE OF ALLENTOWN'S PROUD OLD MANSIONS TO ITS FORMER SPLENDOR.

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Steps from the rear entrance of Allentown's Hotel Traylor, across the street from the Hampshire House Apartments and a half-block from the Episcopal House high-rise for the elderly is one of the finest homes in the city.

It has been boarded up for 14 months.

Owned for a half-century by one of Allentown's most prominent families, long the setting for some of the city's richest social gatherings, the 18-room mansion at 25 S. 15th St. has been empty since the summer of 1997.

During the years the house sat empty, every brass lock on the home's exterior doors was stolen. So were the copper downspouts and brass window fixtures.

A group of vandals who broke in last winter carved initials into the dining room's mahogany paneling, sprayed graffiti on kitchen countertops and splashed gloppy green paint across the inlaid hardwood floors.

Caught in a complicated estate settlement and buffeted by declining values, the property hung in the balance for several years, and to many of the nearly 18,000 motorists who drive past the home every day, it must have seemed like the proud old mansion was headed for destruction.

Then a miracle happened: Someone bought it.

Siobhan Loizeaux-Bennett, her husband, Martin Ulloa Estrada, and Loizeaux-Bennett's daughters Emma and Rachel gave up their home at 2334 Livingston St. in Allentown's West End and took up residence at 25 S. 15th St. over the weekend.

"We're going to take it back to its original splendor," said Loizeaux-Bennett. "We have been interested in the house for years, and it was very much a goal of ours to live there."

Combining Georgian, Jacobean and Arts and Crafts architectural styles, the house was built by cement manufacturer William G. Bonneville around 1910 and has had five owners. The best known was the man who owned it the longest: Capt. Nolan P. Benner, who for more than 32 years was executive director of the Trexler Foundation.

Benner purchased the home in 1935, two years after Gen. Harry Clay Trexler's death, and made it his residence until his own passing on Sept. 4, 1980. Benner's widow, Carolyn, who is also deceased, sold the house the next year.

But for three decades under Benner's ownership, 25 S. 15th St., which everyone came to call the Benner Mansion, was the active center of a family of accomplishment and a gathering place for the city's business and political elite.

Nearly every day for 32 years, Benner walked the three blocks between his front door and the Trexler Estate's offices at 1227 Hamilton St. He almost always returned home for lunch, a tradition he followed until illness left him housebound at age 82.

Benner and his first wife, Nettie, who died in 1965, raised two children in the house: Nolan P. Jr., who died in December, and Bettie, wife of the late Charles L. Garrettson, who resides in the city's West End.

"If these walls could talk," Bettie Garrettson said during a visit to the house a few days after Loizeaux-Bennett and Estrada took possession a few weeks ago.

Benner became Trexler's chief aide -- and lifelong confidant -- in 1916 after he had worked for the general when they served together in the Pennsylvania National Guard at Mount Gretna, Lebanon County, during World War I.

After Trexler was killed in a car crash in 1933, and following the death of Trexler's wife a year later, Benner acquired a trove of Trexler's furnishings and personal effects, many of which remain in the possession of the family today.

The house was furnished grandly, Bettie Garrettson recalls. The foyer was as large as the living rooms in other people's

homes, and Nettie Benner furnished the entrance hall with a small table surrounded by an arrangement of chairs.

People familiar with the Benner household could judge the status of visitors by whether they were offered a seat on one of the high-backed upholstered chairs in the foyer or whether they were drawn deeper into the comforts of the first floor's arrangement of rooms.

Insurance salesmen and other solicitors never got farther than the foyer, and Garrettson recalls that the circle of chairs came to be called the insurance man's chairs.

Bettie Benner and Charles Garrettson married in 1941, just before the United States entered World War II. Charles Garrettson joined the Naval Reserve shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and his wife continued to reside in her parents' home until after he returned from active duty in 1945.

The living room, with its Old English-style fireplace and its plaster relief ceiling, runs the entire depth of the house. The room is so large that the Benners' grand piano in the northwest corner of the room took up just a fraction of the space.

On the opposite side of the first floor is the mahogany-paneled dining room. A table large enough to comfortably seat more than a dozen people for a formal dinner occupied the center of the room.

"My mother was a fabulous entertainer," Bettie Garrettson recalled. Her father served on numerous boards, her mother was a leader of the city's social life, and 25 S. 15th St. became a favored address for cocktail parties, intimate dinners and spirited holiday drop-ins.

In the basement, Benner built a knotty pine rathskeller, complete with a built-in bar, that he modeled after the lounge at Skytop Lodge in the Poconos. Kegs of beer were always kept on tap, and it became a tradition for the Benners to play host to the Muhlenberg College basketball team and team benefactors once a year.

A big Oriental rug covered the dining room floor. It hid a brass button the hostess could push with her foot to silently signal the maid in the kitchen to serve the next course or clear the dinner dishes.

Only, as Garrettson remembers it, her mother could never find the button. After repeatedly pawing the carpet with her shoe and failing to draw the maid from the kitchen, Nettie Benner would give up and shout, "Mary."

Nettie Benner died in 1965; four years later Nolan Benner married Carolyn Thomas. Nolan and Carolyn took a trip to Asia and came home enchanted with Japan. They decorated the house with Japanese art and furniture and redesigned the home's back yard to accommodate a Japanese garden.

After her husband died, Carolyn Benner sold 25 S. 15th St. to a real estate agent who, for several years, operated his business out of the first floor while he lived with his family on the second and third floors. But the agent's business ran into trouble, and the house changed hands again.

The next owner was a young man from Bethlehem who was employed in his family's business. He loved the house, decorated it lavishly at Christmas, threw open its doors for a big celebration every July Fourth and got used to people ringing the doorbell to ask if the property was a bed-and-breakfast because the international flags he used to festoon the front entrance made it look like an embassy or a hotel.

But the young man died unexpectedly of an illness in 1997, and the house became ensnared in a complicated estate settlement.

As a result, when the house went on the market briefly and did not sell during the city's struggle to pull out of one of the deepest real estate slumps to hit Allentown in generations, the bank foreclosed on the property.

The house sat in limbo for months. In December 1997, a neighbor noticed teen-agers going in and out and notified police. When city inspectors discovered vandalism, a crew from Allentown's Bureau of Code Enforcement and Rehabilitation hammered plywood over the leaded glass windows and drove screws into the woodwork to seal the doors.

The boarded-up mansion caught the attention of Loizeaux-Bennett.

She and her first husband, Muhlenberg soccer coach Jeffrey Tipping, moved to Allentown from Oneonta, N.Y., 14 years ago. They shopped for a house for a year and a half and looked at a dozen or more properties throughout the Lehigh Valley before their real estate agent finally showed them properties in Allentown's West End.

The couple liked the tree-lined streets of the neighborhood, that schools were within walking distance, and they purchased a modern house at 23rd and Livingston streets.

But Loizeaux-Bennett missed the charm of an old house. She'd been involved in a historic restoration movement in Oneonta and had renovated several old Victorian houses. She made inquiries about the Benner Mansion after she saw

its windows boarded up and feared by the time the estate was settled, there'd be nothing left to the property worth buying.

Finally, late last year, the 4,534-square-foot house came back on the market. Loizeaux-Bennett took her daughters to tour it, and all that Emma, 14, and Rachel, 12, could say after they stepped inside was, "Wow!"

After the children voiced their enthusiasm, it was only a matter of completing the transaction, waiting for settlement and moving in. The couple agreed to pay \$160,000 for the property.

A Livingston Street neighbor who had moved from center city could not believe Loizeaux-Bennett and her family wanted to leave the quiet of the West End. But Loizeaux-Bennett is not cowed by the many negative perceptions people have of Allentown's downtown.

"As a family, we're committed to this move," says Loizeaux- Bennett. "Allentown is a wonderful city, and conditions are what you make them."

Indeed, Loizeaux-Bennett is a member of the Allen High parents' council that helps teachers and administrators set the course for the school and is working with city officials on a housing rehabilitation program she'd like to see Allentown launch.

"The house, in a way, is a symbol of the city's highs and lows," says Loizeaux-Bennett. "But it's our city, and we're going to help make it better."

Illustration

PHOTO by ROB UPTON, Special to The Morning Call CAPTION: Martin Ulloa Estrada and his wife, Siobhan Loizeaux-Bennett, stand in the formal living room of their 18-room mansion.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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