The Sixth Annual

GOWEN ESTATE HOUSE TOUR

April 24th, 1999

7225 Boyer Street - 1891

Late in the second decade of the twentieth century, Henry L. Butler sold his home in Gwynedd Valley and moved back to the Hansel and Gretel-styled house he had built at 7225 Boyer Street in 1891. He felt more comfortable there because, in the blindness of old age, he could more easily navigate familiar walls and angled doorways. It's believed that Butler, a mechanical engineer, actually planned the house himself and then paid C.R. Kohl and Brother $7,000 to build it. The Victorian penchant for novelty and variety is evident on the exterior, where an exuberant array of shed dormers appear to give birth to more dormers lower on the roof; where small angled windows seem delightfully out of proportion with the two large prow-shaped dormers that engage them; where odd-shaped 4-over-1 windows with bluestone sills are scattered across the stone exterior; and where a very low and 'shingle-lumpy' ski-slope roof drops low at the entrance for dramatic effect.

Before the move to the Gowen Estate, Butler had roots in Germantown, where for many years he was active in St. Michael's Episcopal Church. He served as president of the Workingmen's Club of Germantown and belonged to its Drawing Club. Like some of his neighbors, Butler worked for William Sellers and Company, machine tool manufacturers.

Two officers of the company built the elaborate Queen Anne twin in the 200 block of Gowen Avenue that was featured in an earlier Gowen Estate House Tour.

When the current owner purchased the house, it was in serious disrepair. Amid walls naked to the lath, a local electrician lifted the new owner's spirits, saying that the house had good bones -- like Katharine Hepburn. Not only did it fall to the artist-owner to put flesh back on the walls by her own hand, she was also motivated to add makeup. She did not just paint the walls house-painter style, she blurred the line between reality and illusion, creating the kind of dream world that Butler was forced to live with in his blindness. Eyes dead, he might have pictured the kinds of soft gray shadows that many years later the current owner whimsically painted on her walls.

This house has surprises at every turn: an asymmetrically composed stained glass panel centered in the Living Room; a unique window in the second floor bathroom composed of three panes of glass forming a magical space that is both inside and outside the house; and a Victorian fireplace that combines an embossed iron firebox, fluted tapering columns, deep shelf and oversized brackets. In the Dining Room, Kitchen, and two small back rooms natural light plays sumptuously across inventively painted walls. The effect is beguiling; her creative accommodation applied to challenging architectural conditions is worthy of a prize.

414 East Gowen Avenue - 1907

Philadelphia architect Howard Smith Richards, a graduate of Germantown Academy and the University of Pennsylvania, lived at 411 Gowen Avenue across the street from Horace Burrell, a builder. One can imagine the two of them on a hot summer afternoon in 1907, their starched collars loosened and shirt sleeves rolled up, rocking on Richards' porch and staring at the empty lot directly across Gowen Avenue. They may not have said a word to one another but you can be sure they both thought 'Project'. Details of how they teamed up to design and build the house at 414 Gowen Avenue are lost, but the fruit of their collaboration stands proudly on a slight rise overlooking the street.

Burrell built this house for $10,000. The first owner was George W. Bates and his wife Charlotte. After George's death, Charlotte lived there until 1944, when it was sold to Towsend and Constance Buggey, who in turn sold it to J. Chester Crother and his wife Marion in 1948. Ownership of the house changed hands again only four years ago.

A centrally positioned, gable-ended porch supported by white Doric columns leads to the front door whose sidelights and transom are glazed with diamond-shaped leaded glass panels. Being a stone house, the windows are deep set and the window jambs are paneled in wood. Stained glass has been added to the front Dining Room windows and the panes of the side window have a scene sandblasted on them by

the current artist-owner for more privacy.

The fireplace has an unusual glass-topped mantel with built-in uplighting, and the firebox has lovely salmon-colored brickwork. Upstairs, the owner faux-painted a wood panel to perfectly match the section of wheat colored tiles that was lost in the conversion of a bathroom to a sunny laundry.

381 East Gowen Avenue - 1905

Another Gowen Estate house designed by a local is this quietly appealing house, set off from adjacent properties by its white painted rail and post fence. Around the turn of the century, Herman Bernard Feldman was living at 218 East Gowen in a house he had designed for himself. He was a mechanical engineer with a good eye for design. His client was Florence Sager McCarthy, wife of E. Joseph McCarthy. The McCarthys lived there for only two years and sold the house in 1907 to Meredith and Jennie R. Jones. As with many other families, the Depression destroyed the Joneses financially and they lost their beloved house in a Sheriff's sale.

An inviting white-painted porch with curious Corinthian capitals atop round columns fronts on Gowen Avenue. A wide and gracious door leads to a large entry hall on the northeast side of the house. Particularly appealing are exquisitely colored stained glass panels -- one on the landing between the first and second floors and another in the Living Room. At night, an outside light illuminates the stained glass panel on the stair; the effect is stunning.

405 East Gowen Avenue - 1889

This extraordinary house, the only one in the Gowen Estate sporting an elevator, was built in 1889 by builder George Goodfellow for Silas Horace Alleman and his wife Kate. Alleman was an attorney in the firm of Sharp and Alleman and a member of Common Council, now known as City Council. In 1904, the Allemans sold it to Philip S. Smith, a machine manufacturer.

Although content with the Victorian styling of the house, the Smiths were not content with its size. Based on plans dated March 1, 1906 prepared by Chas. Z. Klauder, a successful Philadelphia architect, a wing was added to the house on the Crittenden Street side. Included in the addition was a beautiful oak-paneled Music Room on the first floor with a new fireplace at one end and a small south-facing greenhouse at the other end. A new garage was built below the Music Room with a porte-cochere whose roof serves as a deck. Above the Music Room, Klauder added a new dressing room and bath on the second floor.

Also at this time, a carriage house (featured in a prior tour) was built halfway down Crittenden Street, and greenhouses were added to an existing conservatory, creating a Palm House and a Chrysanthemum House.

Architect Klauder not only liked the results of his designs for the Smiths, but he must have liked the neighborhood as well, because that same year he built his own house on the lot across the street from the Smith house.

In 1911, the Smiths sold the house to Charles W. Kolb, partner in a family bakery later bought out by the Bond Bread Company. Kolb died shortly after the move, and his sisters, the Misses Emma and Sarah Kolb, inherited and expanded the property. Active in philanthropy, they died a month apart in 1955. It was sometime during this period that Tudor detailing was added to the house. The second floor of the house is now half-timbered, sitting on a first-floor base of the original brick with limestone window trim. Twin bow windows flanking the central rectangular bay on the second floor are, in the eyes of some observers, expressive of the era of ownership by the two spinster sisters. While the rear facade is asymmetrical and overlooks an expanse of lawn

that once included the grand Conservatory, the front facade of the house is strictly symmetrical, with no trace of the Victorian porch that once wrapped around three sides of this impressive house.

434 Wadsworth Avenue - 1932

This semi-detached twin is one of many similar houses built on relatively small lots on Wadsworth Avenue by Charles G. Erny and James A. Nolen, well-known builders with an eye for quality. The $8,975 price tag bought a lot of house for the money. The front facades of brick and stone are unusually well designed, with bay windows on the first floor joined by a common chimney that accents the composition, yet allows each house to have its own identity. Slate and tile roofs further give the homes a look of substance.

The large sunken living room (19 feet by 21 feet) features an angled stone fireplace rising to a beamed ceiling with a centrally positioned diamond-shaped coffer. The original Vitrolite glass walls were removed from the Kitchen during a recent renovation, but the glass is still intact in the bathrooms -- green glass wainscoting in the skylighted Hall Bath; white and black in the Master Bath. The Master shower stall, large enough for two, is lined with floor-to-ceiling opaque white glass tiles, visible through the original G. M. Ketchum shower door -- its deco cresting still in place. Visitors should not overlook the skylighted stained glass 'rose window' at the top of the stairs, and the original porcelainized range, an antique that the current owners feel is too quaint and well preserved to put out with the trash.

But this attractive development on Wadsworth Avenue and Allens Lane was not built without a fight. In 1924 the landowners on Gowen Avenue rose up in protest as they had on previous occasions. They thought that the location of Wadsworth Avenue as shown on a survey ordered by the Gowen Estate trustees would forever protect their large homes and significant investments from the downgrading effect of smaller lots and houses. But the courts ruled that the Estate, in dedicating the proposed Wadsworth Avenue to the City, was then free to relocate the street and add yet another street. The courts ruled that as the original plan had not been made part of the deeds for the Gowen Avenue properties, the homeowners had no protection under the law.

In an odd turn of events, the resulting smaller houses on Wadsworth Avenue and Allens Lane have contributed an unexpected value -- the creation of the well-balanced, heterogeneous neighborhood that exists today. Just as the gracious new houses on Wadsworth and Allens Lane came on the market, the P. & R. Railroad was abandoning their steam engines in favor of cleaner and quieter electrically-driven engines, another hallmark of the modern era.

See you at the Church

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