

A 19th Century Homestead And A Patchwork House Are Reminders Of McKownville's Colorful Past

PART II

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Membership in the Albany Country Club, which provided the site for the new State University campus, may have been a factor in Republican politician William Barnes' choice of a location for the McKownville lodge that was described here last week. Barnes, like Thomas Francis Wood (builder of an adjacent house), belonged to the institution which was founded in the 19th century as the Albany Outing Club.

During the 1850's the land now occupied by the university campus, and the four satellite houses on the southern fringe of the campus, was a part of the Christian LaGrange farm. The LaGrange family is the subject of many chapters in Guilderland history. Its members were early inhabitants of extensive reaches along the Normanskill. The head of the McKownville branch of the clan, around the middle of the 19th century, was Christian La Grange, a prosperous farmer and a participant in the Anti-Rent Wars of the period.

It was on parts of the Christian La Grange farm that the Albany Outing Club was first established. Judge John Holt-Harris, Jr. says that the house west of his and off of Mc Kownville's Norwood Street may have been the original farm house on the LaGrange tract. The low and spreading brown shingled structure, with ample screened-in verandas, is now vacant. It once housed Mr. and Mrs. Charles Tracey. Mrs. Tracey, by then a widow, died last summer.

A peek through the ground floor windows discloses antique furnishings and dark, gloomy family portraits. Mrs. Tracey had been an invalid for a long time before her death. She is said to have claimed that some of the furniture in the house once belonged to the historic Schuylers of Albany.

Albany attorney Thomas Francis Wood collected fragments of old buildings. Among the pieces which were put together on the McKownville site, under the direction of architect Hugh Crisp, were the store room and office from the Hawley brewery in Albany, which became the entrance hall and dining room of the patchwork house.

The place began its existence as a modest wintering spot—a warm retreat for tired snowshoers, Judge Holt-Harris tells us. Wood was a snowshoer, an Albany Country Club member, active in Republican politics and a State Street (Albany) neighbor of William Barnes, Jr. He was quite a few years younger than



MRS. LOIS GREGG, associate dean of students at State University descends the magnificently carved staircase leading from the balcony to the living room of the former Wood home.

Barnes but, he, too, had a family tradition of political involvement and a secure position in Albany society.

The living room of the house Wood built but never lived in comprises bits of the Brewery Inn, the place where visitors to the Hawley establishment were entertained. The Oak cabinets and panelling are from the Myers' and Whitney houses which once stood on Albany's Capitol Hill. Ceiling beams are from an ancient stable. The chandelier is made out of a wagon wheel and Civil War bayonets.

Albany University's associate dean of students, Mrs. Lois Gregg, lives in the Wood house. She rents it from the SUNYA Faculty and Student Association. The furniture which she brought with her from a previous home in California is perfectly suited to the spirit of the house.

Paintings and compositions in stained glass, done by Mrs. Gregg, decorate the home which the dean shares with Miss Janet Havens of the University's Counseling Service. The women installed insulation in an upstairs porch to turn it into a

pleasant bedroom. The house is not over-endowed with bedrooms, closets or bathrooms.

The Tracey house and Mrs. Gregg's home along with the Holt-Harris' modern counterpart and the Council of Churches' one-time hunting lodge, standing as they do aloof and mysterious—between McKownville proper and the University campus, exert a powerful fascination. They are anachronisms. As much as the idea of such a quaint little neighborhood warms and delights there is always the fear that it will not last. Are the University's concrete dormitory towers compatible with the stucco turrets of William Barnes' Ruritanian retreat? Can the designs of Thomas Wood's architect, Hugh Crisp, co-exist with those of Nelson Rockefeller's campus architect, Edward Durrell Stone? Time will tell.

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