A Passion to Preserve

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AT AN EARLY AGE I had an appreciation for old things. We were poor, but my mother had a china cabinet with pieces of ruby red etched glass, hallowed treasure. I remember the great tragedy when one of my sisters broke a hurricane lamp. You’d have thought the world had come to an end. I still have a lot of the stuff that was in that old china cabinet and furniture from our original home.

I had a rather romantic dream about buying a big, old rambling farmhouse, so Richard and I looked around in all directions and came upon Cooksville one Sunday afternoon. We stopped at Eunice Mattakat’s antiques store and asked if she knew of anything for sale, and she sent us to Marvin Raney. Marvin was terribly courteous. He was very fetched by Richard, I found out subsequently. He walked us across the green and showed us this place, which had a huge, clumsy, ugly porch on the front, as well as an ignominious TV tower, just horrible. Marvin was saying it had a lot of potential, but I turned up my nose. So we went to look at several places off in the country. Then I read *In Cold Blood* and decided I did not want to live out in the wide-open country, distant from neighbors. This house began to look much more appealing.

Marvin introduced us to Michael Saternus and Bill Wartmann. Michael was this immense, handsome devil who hardly ever said a word. He smiled a lot and drank a lot and was gorgeous to look at. And he was terribly enthusiastic about restoration, even though he and Bill were living at Wartmann’s place on Caledonia Road with no north wall and no west wall. They would go to a movie house to get warm. Michael checked out the house Marvin had showed us to make sure that it was structurally sound and all that. I think he was just humoring us, but we felt as if we had gotten expert advice and decided to make an offer. I made what I thought was a ridiculously low offer, and I’ll be damned if the seller didn’t accept it, right then, cash. We really lucked out because we got it for nothing.

We started spiffing up the place almost immediately. Our first project was sort of a promise that Michael urged us into: to restore, as close to the original as possible, the front elevation of the house. So the three of us began, and some of my lesbian friends came and helped to tear off that awful
front porch. It was sort of a community effort. Lots of people, straight and gay, were so pleased when they saw what we were doing and helped us.

Next was the restoration of the three rooms in the front of the house. We ripped up every damn floorboard and straightened things out, then started on the woodwork. Even though we knew that the wood was painted originally, we decided that we liked the patina of the old pine too much. Then we stripped off all the wallpaper and repaired the walls and ceilings as best we could.

Michael did most of the carpentry. We often felt guilty throughout the restoration because Michael spent so many hours working on our house, from hauling the filthy old furnace out of the basement to building cabinets with old wood. He loved to spend weekend after weekend tinkering with that. I think it was about this time that he decided that he really wanted to specialize in restoration. Richard and I worked hard too, but we didn’t know what we were doing. I was Michael’s gofer.

Then Wartmann and Michael told us—and I remember how shocked I was—that the lovely kitchen had to go. It was a lean-to that stretched all the way across the south side of the house, windows on every side and wonderfully cozy. But the roof was bad, and it was on a concrete slab. So that was the next project. Our plans grew beyond simply replacing the kitchen to building an addition. We decided to contract that out but did all the work that we could ourselves, to save money. And always recycling, as did Michael Saternus, every board, every nail, everything.

We ate over at Marvin’s practically every night when we were without a bathroom and kitchen. And Marvin would wander over frequently to see what was going on, what progress was being made. He was good advice and was grooming Michael all the while, teaching him what was appropriate and what wasn’t. Marvin came up with original photographs showing how the front porch should be. He was the dean of the village and a great buddy. There were, God, how many bottles of gin that went down in this house during that period.

Chester worked in Chicago and seldom came to Cooksville because he was living with his mother in Hammond, Indiana. When his mother died, he announced he was moving back here, which sort of shook Marvin up because that meant he could not carry on in his old curmudgeonly ways. Chester immediately started having things done to their house, like modernizing the bathroom and kitchen, and that didn’t go over well with Marvin. Chester wasn’t as sensitive as Marvin would have liked about details. I remember the great fight, and Chester saying, “I’m simply not going to have an antique bathroom!” For so many years Marvin had been the ruler of the house. Suddenly Chester came back, and Marvin couldn’t say a word because the house belonged to Chester, and he could do whatever the hell he wanted.
Chester said that one day he simply got fed up with all the crappy old cracked china that Marvin had, so he went to Marshall Field’s and bought a new set of dishes.

When I was hauling furniture and china and linens back from my childhood home in Michigan, Marvin was the consultant. Is this worth anything? Shall we throw this out, or shall we keep it? Marvin had a great deal to do with the way the interior of our house looked, what was appropriate. When he had his shop, he would tell us, “I have something that’s very good and very nice and that you should have.” Richard and I have a magnificent tapestry and many pieces of furniture that came from him.

We saw a great deal of Marvin and Chester in those days. Every weekend they were here or we were there. After we had been living here for a while, a friend of some friends who was studying to be a landscape architect came out on successive Sundays with his lush of a lover to map out our garden. All the while Marvin and Chester sat back smugly and maybe smarting, because it didn’t occur to us that this was just the kind of thing that they loved to do and were experts at, because of their own garden. So we had them look at the plan, and they modified it, discreetly and delicately but substantially. They would say, for instance, “You need gray dogwood. We have lots of that. We can give you all the gray dogwood that you want.” They were very generous because they wanted to pass on to us certain lovely plants. Gardening was the cement that held Marvin and Chester together. By the time we had moved here they had started to neglect their magnificent gardens, but Marvin used to work in them all day long. It was fun to see them talk together about items in their yard. They, of course, knew everything by its Latin name and had their little botanical in-jokes.

Marvin was terribly bright and cultivated his curmudgeonlyness. He had no patience with phony people and was very opinionated but very informed. He read the New York Times from cover to cover every damn day of his life. Chester was a businessman who was also very well informed, but not as well informed as Marvin, which would cause some sparks once in a while. Chester was kind of a dandy. He used to have his hair tinted and was careful about his dress, whereas Marvin couldn’t care less and would wear any old rag.

Marvin was cautious about the idea of Richard and me moving into the village, but it appears that Chester was the one who was uptight about it. He didn’t want Cooksville turning into a faggots’ haven. They were a wonderful pair. Chester and I grew to be very close friends, as did Richard and Marvin. Richard admired Marvin a great deal as an intellectual, and Chester and I simply had a lot of fun; we traveled a fair amount together. Chester became much less uptight about being gay because we had gay parties and gay friends
as visitors frequently. Chester would come to our notorious Thanksgiving
drag parties, but Marvin wouldn’t.

Marvin’s concern about Richard and me buying this house was prob-
ably that he didn’t want a bunch of flaming fairies over here. It was about
1968; you just didn’t flaunt it. We weren’t effeminate, so there was no reason
outwardly to think that we were anything but a couple of regular joes, par-

ticularly since we mixed cement and built foundations ourselves. People might
say, “Isn’t that nice, two young men are restoring that house.” Most of the
straight people in the village welcomed us with open arms. Total strangers
brought us housewarming gifts like a cake or a pot of stew.

There have been bachelors around Cooksville for a long time, and there
is a long tradition of gay men taking the lead in preserving the village, fortu-
nately always in a very quiet and subdued manner. We’ve always been very
pleased about that. Mineral Point has long been a nest of fighting, bitching
gay people who are more flamboyant than here in Cooksville. In Mineral
Point you see a lot of Chicago types who have moved in, with dyed hair and
excessive jewelry and effeminate manner, which pretty immediately identi-
ﬁes them as gay people. That hasn’t happened in Cooksville. There have
been a lot of gay people around here, but we’ve never thrown it in the face of
the straights. And although we were screwing around with each other early
on, there was always a rule that you don’t mess with any of the straight men
in the village.

When we ﬁrst met Michael, he was so shy and timid that it was painful,
and at the same time he was hot as a pistol. Michael had met Wartmann as a
graduate student in Madison, and they were up to their eyebrows in that
place on Caledonia Road, so he already had a passion for restoration. He had
come to know Cooksville, was enchanted by the village, and saw the possi-
bilities, and with encouragement from Marvin and Larry he decided that the
village was his project. Michael would do anything that he could to convince
people to restore in Cooksville. It was a passion, and he was completely de-
voted to it. He came out of his shell, had more conﬁdence in himself as an
authority, and knew what he was talking about, be it restoration or opera or
whatever.

Gay men are very sensitive to beauty. It’s perhaps a hackneyed stereo-
type, but I believe in it—I simply know it. It’s an aesthetic capacity, an appre-
ciation of beauty in old things, the grace of a lovely, older house with
elegant details. And when gay men are interested in something, they give it
their all, tremendous amounts of creative energy and physical energy. Not
many straight people would do for this house what we did for it.