Dana Duppler

Born in 1949, the oldest of six children, Dana Duppler grew up on a farm near Paoli, a small town near Madison, Wisconsin. With a vision to save early-settlement buildings from the state’s nineteenth-century lead-mining days, Duppler founded the Lead Region Historic Trust.

A SENSE OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND COMMUNITY is strong with me, and I’ve always had an interest in history: how my community developed, where the settlers came from. I’m three-quarters German, one-quarter French, and I traced my family back to the settlement period. The Germans came to the area in the early 1850s, the French followed a bit later. Historical buildings and personages are all intertwined, all part of the big picture. I’ve got a good collection of real early photographs, all identified and properly cared for, of buildings and people in the Paoli area.

As a kid I always liked old things. My grandmother gave me a kerosene lamp and a little crock jar that you beat eggs in, and a lady in Paoli gave me some more stuff. A lot of people would give me photographs in frames. My room was piled full of it. Ma thought I was out of my mind. I didn’t ever go to an antique shop or show; nothing like that. Wouldn’t have had any way to do it. But something about auctions intrigued me. I went to one in Paoli with my folks when I was maybe eleven or twelve, but I didn’t go to one on my own until I was about twenty. Since then I’ve gone to thousands of them. In the seventies I did it to furnish the place where I lived. Now I do it more to acquire things to sell to make a profit. To keep myself going I do a little antique and art buying and selling on the side, anything that’s handmade that has artistic character, with some age. Folk art, architectural art, weathered building pieces that had some design in the first place, to which nature has added the patina of a hundred years.

The house I currently live in, Fischer Hall, is an 1850s house of some character that has been familiar to me all my life. The building was named after William Fischer, one of the longtime early occupants. There was a dance hall upstairs, where the school had their plays and where town meetings were held. My grandfather and my dad went there to vote; I remember going up there with them a couple of times. We always drove by it, and the old couple that lived there were cousins of my grandfather, so I would stop down to see them when I was a kid. I always really liked the building, and it just seemed like it was the place that I should be. Something intrigued me about the style of the large old house. Italianate brackets are really the only ornamentation, and each bracket has a turned acorn; that
artistic design must have caught my eye when I was a little kid. All my life I can remember those brackets.

Fischer Hall was really the community center of Paoli. There was a store on the first floor and a tavern in the basement. The people that ran those businesses had their living quarters on the west side of the building. Later they added on and started a cheese factory, so there was a lot going on in there. The last year it was used for the township meetings and voting was 1955. I bought it twenty years later, and when I got done restoring it in 1982 I had a big party upstairs. We got in a good old string band and a couple of half barrels and cheese and had a real good time. I’ve done that almost every year since; second Saturday of June I get the band in there and have a dance. And on Friday nights between April and October, groups of contradancers use the hall maybe a dozen or fifteen times each year. So it gets some good use.

When I bought Fischer Hall in 1975, I intended to restore the building eventually, but I had no funds and no knowledge of hands-on restoration. I had visited a lot of historic house restorations though, and probably the one that interested and motivated me the most was Pendarvis in Mineral Point. I knew the history of what had happened there, that what was there was good, and that somebody with foresight had made it happen. But I never imagined that I could do something like that. By 1978 I was ready to go at it but still had no knowledge and no way that I could do anything. At the time I was running a precision machining shop in Paoli. I had heard of Mike Saternus in Cooksville, so I called him up and asked if I could hire him to look at the building with me and give me some direction.

Saternus walked through Fischer Hall with me and pointed out features that he considered of worth. What he showed me on that first visit was how to look at the building, how to think about it, and how not to put my feelings about the building onto it, but to let it speak for itself. To respect the designs of those who originally built it and to respect the uses and adaptations that had occurred in the building over time, which had gained some significance in their own right. Built in the 1850s, Fischer Hall had had some additions and modifications in the 1870s and again in the 1890s. Initially I thought they should be reversed, but after talking with Saternus I could see why they were important parts of the building. So he helped to form my thinking very early on. He did some drawings for me, to replace a missing cupola and doorway and to rework the porch, and over the next three or four years I had relatively frequent contact with him. He showed me the great Greek and Gothic Revival houses in Cooksville. I read and reread every book on historic architecture that I could find.

I had gradually become aware that Wisconsin’s development began in the southwest lead-mining region and that the first settlers there had come
from the southern and eastern parts of the United States, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Missouri in particular. They brought with them to southwest Wisconsin some of the vernacular building styles that had developed in other areas of this country and that were influenced by the Federal or Greek Revival or Gothic Revival styles. As I traveled to auctions in southwest Wisconsin in the early to mid-1970s, I would see these buildings in the old mining towns. I started to build a body of knowledge about styles and forms and vernacular types that I saw there and that I didn’t see anywhere else in the state.

In the early 1970s things were just starting to get going in Mineral Point, although Pendarvis had been done years before. There was a mindset there that something was of value in their built environment. But I saw that once you got outside of Mineral Point, or Galena, Illinois, there was really no interest in preservation. Lots of good things were just going completely to hell, and there wasn’t anything I could do. I was tied up with my machining business, and I had no skills with my hands outside of that. I did some hands-on work on Fischer Hall but hired most of that work done between 1978 and 1980, then started to learn to do finish work myself.

I first saw the Prairie Spring Hotel, forty miles from Paoli, in 1982 and talked to the owners then. Complete nutcases, both of them. I couldn’t buy the building because I couldn’t do anything with it, but I could see that it was really important. From my readings and observations I figured this building had to be one of the oldest around, probably early 1830s. I kept working on the owners, primarily to prevent them from destroying it.

I sold the machining shop in 1984; I liked the work, but I wanted to take a break. So I went to Wiota, one of the early lead-mining settlements, thirty-eight miles from Paoli. For two thousand bucks I bought a little saltbox house that dated to about 1840. It was in a hell of a shape, but I had started to develop some carpentry skills and had practiced on a couple of buildings that I bought and resold. I felt like I was ready to do something in the lead region on a more serious scale. So I poured a bundle of money and time into restoring the little house in Wiota. I didn’t need a second house to live in, so I rented it out when I got done with it. But I got familiar with Wiota and the early buildings there. I found that most of them had already been destroyed but that the last remaining half-dozen examples were significant. And I got to know Shullsburg a little better and Hazel Green and Dodgeville. I could see that there was so much there and no appreciation for it at all, just totally unrecognized.

If it’s a primitive log cabin, everybody loves it. If it’s Frank Lloyd Wright, you’re supposed to love it. If it’s Queen Anne, you’re supposed to really get into it because it’s the limit. And barns have a mystique about them, especially round barns. Jeez, some people genuflect in front of a round barn.
like them too, but I don’t go completely nuts about them. But historic preservation traditionally has been focused on the buildings that were built by the richest segment of the population. Around the Midwest, when you think of a historic restoration, generally speaking, you think of Italianate, Queen Anne, Second Empire, Stick-style buildings. Grandiose, high-style, mansion-type houses, lots of gingerbread and trim and bullshit. This is okay; I mean, these are significant buildings.

Vernacular buildings are the common, utilitarian structures built by average people who didn’t have a lot of money. But if you really start to look at what’s out there, you find that even these people of moderate means were influenced by the dominant styles of the period. The little one-and-a-half-story saltbox house I restored in Wiota is a vernacular house. But if you look at it carefully, you see that the builder had seen Greek Revival, and with his limited knowledge and tools he put some simple classical detailing on it. It’s bare bones, but it’s there. You see that in just about every building, in one way or another.

I thought these vernacular things were of some worth and that maybe historic preservation should cover a broader field than just the wealthiest 5 percent of the population. That maybe we should look at what the middle class built and what it said about their lives and look at what the miners or the common laborers built and how they lived. Occasionally you’ll see a vernacular building nominated to the National Register, but not very damn often.

By 1990 I had bought and restored two buildings in Wiota and one in Shullsburg. My funds were getting pretty slim. I started to realize that if the work I do is going to endure beyond me, and if these buildings are going to be used as teaching tools to change the perception of what historic preservation is all about, there has to be some type of organization to hold the properties and some type of management group that is knowledgeable about them. And there has to be some money. I was influenced by the model of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. If donated dollars were available to acquire and restore a building, and if it could then be leased out for any money at all, even two hundred bucks a month, that building should be able to support itself. If you escrow, say, one-quarter of that money over the years, the money will be there when the roof needs to be replaced, when the furnace goes to hell, when it needs to be painted. If the proper management structure could be developed, with people trained in how to interpret, care for, and manage these buildings, the buildings would take care of themselves. If you could just get the money together to buy them and restore them.

I visualized setting up an organization that would raise funds, acquire properties, and restore them under my direction. Maybe twenty-five years down the line the organization might own twenty or thirty buildings, there would be no debt, a substantial cash flow, trained people, and I could just lie
down and die, and somebody else could take it over. So, in 1992 I incorpo-
rated the Lead Region Historic Trust, and that’s the concept that we work
on, that buildings are purchased and restored, hopefully given a use similar
to what they were originally intended for, that the organization would derive
income from them, that we would develop a staff and go some place. And
we’re on the road.

Dean Connors came along in 1994 and underwrote the cost of buying
the Prairie Spring Hotel, moving it, restoring the exterior, and all the other
costs. Almost a hundred thousand dollars. I could never thank him enough
for making that happen and for validating what I’m doing. The Prairie Spring
Hotel is a rare, early example, a museum piece, not a building that we’ll ever
lease out. It’s relatively untouched on the inside, and we’d like to preserve it
as much as possible like it is. To make it a house that you could live in, you’d
have to tear out all the hand-split lath, all the original plaster, the layers of
wallpaper that talk about its history. And then, living in it, you would expose
it to the risk of destruction from using electricity in it and heating it. Obvi-
ously, nothing is guaranteed forever; a tornado could wind through there,
and we could lose it. But good curatorial management of that building says
that the site and the building are there for study and exhibit. I’m looking at
not just the next fifty years, but the next five hundred, so that’s going to be
up to somebody beyond me. The paint job is going to be renewed every five
to seven years, the roof you’re going to replace every twenty years, and you’re
going to tuck-point it once every fifty or sixty years. But you aren’t going to
need to do the radical interventions we did to get it structurally stable and to
get it moved.

There are still buildings that I don’t know, but I’ve tried to get to know
what’s around. Most of them are in southern Iowa County, Lafayette County,
and the very southern part of Grant County, because of the heavy mining.
There are some really good, early ones in Dubuque that don’t compare to
anything else, but they’re almost certain to be lost. We won’t have the money
to get them before it’s too late. In Galena everything’s pretty safe, but every-
thing in the immediate area outside of Galena has been destroyed. It’s just
amazing, the stuff that I’ve seen purposely burned and destroyed in the last
five years.

They destroyed a great little Greek Revival in Hazel Green that prob-
ably would have been the best example of the style anywhere in the region.
It was a tiny house but it had everything, and one day they just bulldozed it
and put up a modular home. I could have killed that bastard. I had talked to
him so many times; I’d talked to his wife: “I’m always interested, here’s my
name and number.” He had said they wanted to build there someday. I asked
if he would consider another lot in town, and he said he would if he got a
price for this one. I said, well, we can talk. Seemed to be all right. But the
day I heard about it, it was too late; he already had it down. That one I really
hated to lose.

In Jenkynsville, down in the southwest corner of Lafayette County,
there’s a Georgian-influenced vernacular stone house that has a fantastic
interior. God, is that a great building. It’s small, but it has a presence. You
drive off the road quite a ways to go back to it, and it’s on a little bit of a knoll
and there’s a stream in front of it. It’s a dandy. Dean Connors had a part in
getting that building, which was probably the toughest one of all. These people
were living out of state, and if you called and asked about that house, they’d
swear at you and hang up. Complete assholes. I called them once, explained
that I was just wanting permission to drive up and look at the house. “Fuck
you,” click, dial tone. Something about people wanting that old stone house
just pissed them off.

I had taken Dean down there and showed it to him, and after the Prai-
rive Spring Hotel was moved, he said maybe he should try to buy the
Jenkynsville place. I said it was going to be tough, explained how they wouldn’t
even discuss it and would cuss people out. Dean said he would try a different
approach, use a realtor and an attorney and just say that he was a doctor
looking for acreage in southwest Wisconsin, preferably with a river running
through it. Never mention the house. They were real nice and polite to Dean,
sold him the whole farm. He succeeded in saving a significant building for us
by tricking them.

I’ve been up and down the Mississippi from Saint Louis to Dubuque a
lot of times, every town on both sides of the river. The river towns were
settled real early. You look at some of the towns that have been there a long
time, like the Quad Cities, Muscatine, Burlington, Fort Madison, Hannibal,
Quincy. Quincy’s really loaded. The first area to get settled would be closest
to the river, in the section that is now usually the downtown. And if you look
behind the commercial buildings, sometimes there’s a little house that es-
caped destruction. Or if you look a block back, sometimes they’ll be there. I
can see that every one of those towns has got a couple really neat ones in it
yet, but none of them have been restored or really recognized even. They’re
lived in by people who have no money at all, the house is in a hell of a fuckin’
shape, and there’s shit all over the place, but you can see that they’re real
eyearly buildings. Canton, Missouri, is a real small town that’s got some really
neat early things because nobody ever had the money to change them. I
drive through there, and I just wish there was something I could do.

I think it’s unfair that these early vernacular designs have been so over-
looked. My desire to restore them has to do with their artistic appeal: people
have screwed them all up, and it would be nice to get them back in shape.
Some of them are really rough, just a terrible mess, but when you get done and you look at it and you see it the way it’s supposed to be, the way it was meant to be, and it’s just been a hell of a looking thing, you know that the community is going to appreciate it more, and it can serve the purpose that it was built for.

Somebody asked me once what kind of experience is needed to do what I’m doing. I said it isn’t experience at all; it’s magic. I don’t know what drives me. It’s something that interests me, it’s something that I can do and that I enjoy, it gives my life a value, and nobody else is going to do it. In other words it’s something that’s cut out for me. And it might be an example that other people learn from. Is it a compulsion or an obsession? I don’t know.