A Passion to Preserve

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Joe Johnson and Ron Markwell

In 1885 a twenty-three-room cream-colored brick mansion was built on the main street of Delavan, Wisconsin, for a wealthy farmer. Milwaukee’s leading architect of that era designed the showplace in the Queen Anne style with Eastlake details. With its opulent exterior painted in greens, reds, and creams, it proclaimed that Alexander Allyn was a success.

In the 1920s young Earl Vaughn admired the Allyn Mansion while walking to his piano lesson each week. But in the decades after Vaughn finished high school and moved away, the Allyn Mansion underwent ravaging changes. Stripped of its tower, balcony, porches, and porte-cochere, it was used as a nursing home in the 1950s and 1960s, then as a furniture store through the 1970s and into the 1980s.

Back in town for a visit years later Vaughn saw that two of the Allyn Mansion’s ornate cast-iron urns were still in front of the shabby place. “The whole front yard was a parking lot, blacktop, and here were these perfectly wonderful urns with their bases half buried in it,” he says. “I had to get a pick axe and dig them out, but I made up my mind that they were going to be inside my station wagon that evening.” An antique dealer in Illinois, Vaughn took the urns home to Rockton and wove them into the landscape of his old stone house.

The Allyn Mansion’s redemption was orchestrated by Missouri native Joe Johnson, born in 1940, and Kentucky native Ron Markwell, born in 1936. By the time the two met in 1977, they were both established in their teaching and antique-collecting careers: Johnson was close to filling two houses with Victorian furniture and accessories. They loved to travel, visiting house museums and staying in old-house bed-and-breakfasts.

Markwell and Johnson bought the Allyn Mansion in 1984 and began its meticulous restoration. They tore out walls that were not original, replaced original walls that had been torn out, stripped paint, refinshed a staggering amount of woodwork to a proper Victorian shine, and restored ornately hand-painted ceilings. Finding the architect’s original drawings for the house in a basement safe, they reconstructed the elaborate tower, balcony, porches, and porte-cochere and replicated the original exterior color design. Within two years of buying it they deemed the place habitable enough, and their financial need great enough, to open several bedrooms to the public and begin doing business as the Allyn Mansion Inn Bed and Breakfast. For another five or six years they and their guests inhabited a work very much in progress.
Ron Markwell: Joe was living near Delavan, in a historic house that I helped him restore on weekends. Whenever we’d come to Delavan to shop, we’d use any excuse to come into the furniture store just to look at what remained of the Allyn Mansion. Despite the many horrid changes that had been made to the exterior, and all the tacky furniture they had for sale inside, the house still held its own. We knew the place had once been spectacular, and it still had much to recommend it: the structure was solid, the big mirrors were still here, the nine magnificent Italian marble fireplaces were in perfect shape. Six of the largest gaslight chandeliers were still in place, and one of the original hand-painted ceilings was intact.

Joe Johnson: But we had no idea of ever owning it. After the furniture store closed in 1983, I’d drive by and think, “Have a good look, because the next time you come by here this is going to be a blank spot.” I was sure it was going to be bulldozed. It had been on the market for a decade, and most of the locals thought it was an eyesore that should be torn down.

Markwell: Every time we came in, I felt the house pulling me and saying—

Johnson: “Clean me! Clean me!”

Markwell: “Help me! Help me out here! I’m an important piece of history. Save me!” This place almost fell into the hands of the town’s rooming-house queen. I looked at this house as an underdog, as I do a lot of beautiful structures that need to be saved, shunted off by society at large. In bringing something like this back, we’re thumbing our noses at society: “Look! You didn’t care about this, but look what can be done when you’re willing to spend the time and the money.” Of course, we didn’t truly understand all that it would take to bring this house back.

Johnson: When I look back at the “before” pictures, I don’t know how we did it. I don’t know how we had the guts. But once we worked with it a while, we realized that we’re more owned by the house than we own the house. We got possessed with the whole thing.

Markwell: It’s become our life, our life’s work, an obsession. Even early on, when we still had our full-time teaching jobs, we weren’t really interested in that work anymore. This is what we wanted to do. And we did it gladly, because the old house responded so well to kind treatment.

Johnson: When you get into a project like this, if you don’t get possessed by it you’re going to walk away in six months. We’ve been sort of commandeered by this house. It won’t turn us loose. We are really obsessed with making the house right.

Markwell: We’ve always felt that our ownership transcends just having our names on the deed. We’re stewards for future generations, seeing to it that this structure stays around. And we probably know more about the Allyn family than anybody else in town. Owning a place like this almost dictates
learning about the people who created it, what they did, how they lived here, what happened to them.

**Johnson:** Something odd about this house: It’s very formal and could be intimidating, but within a half-hour of getting here most of our guests end up hanging out in the kitchen, saying they’re ready to move in. A feeling of warmth seems to envelop people here. Even being alone in this house is great—it’s not like there’s something scary moving around upstairs. If there are spirits here, they’re kindred ones.

Soon after we bought this place, a woman who stopped by said she knew where the original urns from the front of the house had gone. “Considering what you’re doing for this town,” she said, “I’m going to see that you get them back.” The urns belonged to a guy she knew who used to live in Delavan. When she told me that he lived in Rockton, I said it would be easy for me to stop by and see him when I was driving to Iowa to visit my parents. “Oh, don’t do that!” she said. “He’s really rather eccentric. He’ll probably kick you off the property.”

Heading for Iowa one day, I couldn’t resist at least driving by his house. And sure enough, there were those urns sitting out in front. Something about my impulsive nature, I suppose, but I walked right up and rang the doorbell. When this guy came to the door, I said, “I’ve come to get my urns.” He said, “I knew you would be coming!” He invited me in, introduced me to his mother who was living with him, and showed me around the house. He was very formal.

“About those urns,” he said. “I felt guilty about taking away something that was original to the property, but I really think I saved them from the dump. I know they belong to the Allyn Mansion, and I’ll see that they get back there someday. For now, I like them where they are.”

Since that first visit, Ron and I have become close friends with Earl. At a party here he mentioned that he knew of two large urns that would be just perfect for the front of the house. “But you’ve told us that your urns are coming back to the Allyn Mansion,” I said. “Well, you can’t have too many urns!” he said. Later, I discovered that Earl has about a dozen urns around his place and that it’s in his will that the Allyn urns are to come back to the mansion.