

Underground railroad stopover

Vintage house was once slaves' haven

By LINDA TAYLOR
West Bloomfield Editor

The City of Orchard Lake Village, with its political upheavals, has a heritage to be lauded.

In the pre-Civil War years when runaway slaves eager for freedom hid by day and ran by night, Orchard Lake provided a stopover in the "underground railroad" system.

Former Orchard Lake mayor Mel Rykus and his wife Barbara now own the vintage Pontiac Trail house once used to hide up to six runaways at a time.

The space used by the slaves is behind a wall in the game room of the rambling house. Two built-in drawers, now used for storage, can be removed to reveal a false backing. Anyone not aware of the actual construction would stop there.

But as Rykus demonstrates, the backing is removable to expose a crawl space large enough, he supposes, for six adults, more if slave catch-

ers were rumored on the prowl. Rykus explained the runaways, it is believed, would find their way from Orchard Lake up to Port Huron or Bay City for escape and freedom in Canada.

THE RYKUS home, now located on two acres of wooded land across Pontiac Trail from the shores of Orchard Lake, used to be one of the main farms in the area.

Rykus still has a photocopy of the original land conveyance signed in 1826 by John Quincy Adams. The then 80-acre parcel was bought by Amicus Smith of Niagara County, N.Y., who subsequently lost it due to failure to pay \$3.45 cents in delinquent taxes.

In 1864 the land became the Emmendorfer Farm. The Emmendorfers, according to Rykus, are forebears of West Bloomfield Twp. Supervisor John N. Doherty.

In 1956 the land was transferred to former Orchard Lake Council member John Hall.

When Rykus purchased the house from Hall, he gutted it and took it on as a restoration project with intentions of returning it to its original state within 20 years. "In seven years, I've done half the work," he said.

While work remains to be done, he has basically restored the now-expanded home to its original rustic charm, with genuine wood paneling, exposed beams and uneven ceiling.

Among projects he still hopes to tackle are finishing the basement, which is still a basic earthen cellar with fieldstone walls. Rykus envisions adding a winding staircase to descend to a dining area. He now uses the space as a wine cellar.

He also hopes to add a greenhouse off the renovated kitchen, which used to be the barn, and return the exterior of the house to clapboard. It is now aluminum siding. He hopes to replace regular roofing shingles with cedar shake.

WHILE RUMOR handed down with

the house indicates the former barn loft was also used to harbor runaway slaves, which brought a \$2,000 bounty per head for slave catchers. Rykus disputes this theory.

He said with the former barn, now kitchen's large window, it would have been too obvious if slaves were hidden there. They could be seen too easily.

"I haven't found any other panels," said Rykus, who has explored the house looking for other possible hiding places. "But I do feel there were ghosts watching me when I working on the house. I'm serious."

Rykus said he also once dreamed that the house ghosts were friendly to ward him because he was restoring the house. He said the ghosts told him, "It's alright. You're not destroying."

Rykus's ghost theory is further substantiated, he thinks, by a photograph once taken in the house by a professional photographer. In one picture, there is a white shadowy thing. The house contains about a dozen of Rykus's own lighting fixture designs. He has also turned the former chicken coop into a shop for another hobby—glass blowing.

Rykus said when he was recalled from the local council and was the target of numerous charges, including payola, he became very discouraged and considered selling the house to move from the city.

"But I couldn't. I like it here," he said. "Besides there's more work to be done."



A senatorial shake

Daniel Togaski of North Farmington High School recently met U.S. Senator Robert Griffin R-Michigan. Togaski was in Washington D.C. on a week-long study of the political process. He is a Farmington Hills resident.

Center offers activities

(Continued from page 1A)

from 7:30-9:30 p.m. Thursdays beginning April 7. Dale Crawford will instruct both novice and experienced students in the eight-session course offered for \$20 plus materials.

If your French vocabulary consists of "merci," you may want to avail yourself of the French for beginners course, scheduled from 7:30-9:30 p.m. Wednesdays beginning April 20. The eight sessions are priced at \$18 and taught by Ron Rapin.

Researching your family tree may be a little easier if you sign up for the center's genealogy course, offered from 1-3 p.m. Thursdays beginning April 21. Rosina Raymond will instruct the eight-session course priced at \$24.

Betty Jackson will conduct a course in Godey Lady pictures, in which students will learn to make an elegant three-dimensional picture from Godey Lady fashion prints. The five-session course is scheduled from 12:30-2:30 p.m. Tuesdays beginning April 19 and priced at \$22 plus materials.

FOR \$24, various guitar instruction courses are offered, all taught by Dorothy Decker. Guitar 1 for beginners,

ages 9-12, is scheduled from 5:45-6:45 p.m.; Guitar 2, for ages 9-11, is scheduled from 6:45-7:45 p.m.; Guitar 2 for ages 12 through adult, is scheduled from 7:45-9:15 p.m. and Guitar 1 for beginners ages 12 to adult, is scheduled from 8:45-9:45 p.m. All classes begin April 4 and consist of 10 sessions.

Two classes in interior design, which can be taken together, are offered from 1-3 p.m. and 9:30-11:30 a.m. Thursdays beginning April 7. Kay Isola will teach both 10-session courses each priced at \$26.

To make your own jewelry, get some advice from Niki Fritz, who will conduct a 10-session course in jewelry making from 7:30-9:30 p.m. Mondays beginning April 4. The course is priced at \$30 plus materials.

Lace making classes, scheduled from 1-3 p.m. Tuesdays beginning April 5, will be conducted by Elsie Bentley. Cost is \$24 plus materials for 10 sessions.

MILDRED WEBB will teach a macrame course from 1-3 p.m. Tuesdays beginning April 19. The five sessions are priced at \$22 plus materials.

To learn how to make a macrame

course, sign up for the beginner or advanced class, each course consisting of four sessions and priced at \$18 plus materials. Beginning classes are scheduled from 9:30-11:30 a.m. Thursdays beginning April 21; and advanced classes will continue from 9:30-11:30 a.m. Thursdays beginning May 19.

Learning how to cook with a microwave oven is what instructor Vincent McCallum's classes are all about. The four-session classes priced at \$20 are scheduled as follows: from 9:30-11:30 a.m. or 7:30-9:30 p.m. Thursdays beginning April 21, with a second session running in the same time periods beginning May 19.

To learn to make miniature furniture, sign up for Jeanne Lee's class, scheduled from 9:30-11:30 a.m. Wednesdays beginning April 27. The six-session course is priced at \$20 plus materials.

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