

Creative Living

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One of the twin porches was added, replacing a cement one, making the 1843 Royal Aldrich House of Farmington Hills true to its original Greek Revival architecture.

Restoration

Original beauty finally uncovered

By C.L. Rugenstein
special writer

Turning into the gravel drive of the restored Royal Aldrich House in Farmington Hills is like time-tripping back to the 1850s.

The visitor alights from a gas-powered car to be greeted by six noisy geese and three curious sheep in their pens. A carriage house, original to the property and still in use, seems to await its owners' return in a one-horse powered buggy. The house and yard look much as they must have 150 years ago when they were new, thanks to the efforts of owners Stephen Olson and Lynn Wilsner.

"Our whole philosophy has been to take it back as close to the original as possible," Olson said. "It turned out to be just about the perfect project because there was so much we would be the first to discover."

To get back to the original though, the husband and wife team had their work cut out for them. The Greek Revival style house had never been totally empty since it was built in 1843. But former owners had left their marks in the form of "improvements" over the years: a fireplace and chimney in the 1950s, a kitchen and bath addition and eight layers of wall paper.

"WE HAD TO TEAR OUT TWO layers of floor boards to get down to the original floor," Olson said as he pointed out the worn wooden floors in the Sunday parlor. The boards were covered in places by equally well-used oriental carpets, and part of the couple's collection of antique furniture.

They also dispensed with a cement porch on one side of the house and replaced it with a wooden one to match the porch on the



Worn wooden floors in the Sunday parlor were found under layers of carpet and other floor covering.

other. The twin porches, opening into one-story rooms on either side of the central two-story main building, are typical of Greek Revival architecture as are the graceful, white columns on the porches.

One of Olson's discoveries was the original gray color of the moldings. He found it in one of those old-house oddities — a strange little, three-shelf cabinet in the upper bedroom, seemingly put in in an illogical place.

The house was originally heated by three free-standing wood-burning stoves, Olson pointed out the patch in the wall where the stove pipe had come through, angling down right in front of the cabinet.

Work on the house led to curiosity about the owners' history, and more discoveries. They found by researching probate records that the house was built by Royal Aldrich, a settler from Farmington, N.Y. Aldrich followed by several years the first wave of settlers

Staff photos by
Dan Dean

from Farmington, but within two years of arriving had built the house.

He also died without a will, leaving a wife, three young children and a probate court record of his belongings and farmyard stock for future owner-researchers like Olson.

"The family held onto the property for another 20 years," Olson said. "But one thing the records didn't tell that I'd like to know is what he died of. He was only 40 years old at the time."

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS Olson did when he moved to Farmington in 1983 was to join the Historical Society. He's since become president, and participated in the old house heritage tours sponsored by the group. There were no tours this year, however.



Lynn Wilsner and Steve Olson met through First Congregational Church in Bloomfield Hills and immediately shared an interest in antiques.



The only room which the couple may modernize is the kitchen neatly hidden behind the folding doors. Collecting antiques is a special pleasure they share.

"It's a lot of work to put together a tour like that," he said. "People are not always interested in showing their houses." He said there are guides to train, publicly, printing and sale of tickets, as well as transportation to be arranged to the houses scattered through Farmington and Farmington Hills adding, "We'll probably have tours again in another year or so."

Another of the couple's discoveries has been how time-consuming restoration work can be. Perseverance is a must.

"They came with the house," Olson said. "Three geese and one sheep."

The couple acquired two more sheep when a neighbor presented them with a pregnant ewe, then they added three hatching geese.

The animals are self-sufficient, even in winter Olson said. They live off the land, although Olson supplements with hay and water.

About the irascible geese Olson said, "They're weird. We can't tell if they're being affectionate or mad at us when they bite. They're the most ornery animal you'll ever meet, but I guess that's part of their charm."

And they in turn are part of the charm of the old farmhouse Olson and Wilsner have restored "as close to the original as possible."

Wyeth draws a tender 15-year portrait

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

"The Helga Pictures" by Andrew Wyeth, which opened this week at Detroit Institute of Arts, might have been named "A woman and her moods as seen by painter Andrew Wyeth."

He did these 120 drawings and paintings of his neighbor, Helga Tesor (including several of her daughters) from 1971 to 1985, beginning when she was 38 years old.

Wyeth's response to Helga's natural, almost rustic beauty grows more and more intimate as the art progresses through the years. While her facial expression varies in degrees of stolidism, her body sends different messages. There are no smiling Helgas, but there are lush, nude, unsmiling Helgas, relaxed nude Helgas, slightly self-conscious nude Helgas and buttoned down, Germanic looking Helgas as in "The Prussian."

While the reason for that title is obvious, in retrospect, it seems a trifle cruel, as though she rejected

him and he is striking back. There may have been no interplay such as this between them, but that interplay message comes through in so many of the drawings that it's hard not to try to second guess.

WYETH DELIGHTS in her hair, from the thick, no-nonsense braids to a sunlit cascade of loose strands over bare shoulders, he always handles her hair with loving care, like with his brush seems to caress the hollows of her cheeks, her full serious mouth and her clear, scrubbed skin.

One, possibly the finest painting of all, "Overflow," a nude, is drybrush, which Wyeth does masterfully. In terms of technique, impact and passion, it's outstanding. This one has a level of sophistication, which is lacking in many of the others. It is an entity unto itself. His use of light, here, is exciting. His sense of delight with his subject is contagious.

Museum director Samuel Sachs II has some enlightening comments on this painting in his commentary on the Acoustiguide audio tour, which visitors can rent.



"In the Orchard," 1974, a watercolor, Wyeth portrays Helga almost as an extension of the beauty of nature that surrounds her.

Another of the outstanding paintings is "Sheepskin," somehow reminiscent of Manet's portraits in its directness and skill. It doesn't depend on symbolism and hidden (or not so hidden) messages to carry it. It's

simply a work of art that could stand on its own in company with fine works by great painters, which is more than can be said for many of the drawings and sketches. You may wonder initially (I did

too) why Wyeth didn't give Helga a couch as is Goya's "The Duchess of Alba" in the painting, "Black Velvet." As it is, she floats, ankles crossed, wearing only a black ribbon at her throat, in a kind of void, not unlike the black holes of outer space — unexplained, unresolved. In a strange mental juxtaposition, Wyeth seems to know what to do with his subject on paper and canvas better than he does in relation to himself.

There are signs at times that he is troubled and "Black Velvet" seems to give evidence of that. Even the light sources are a mystery. Where does she belong? Is she really there or is she an apparition? Sometimes the series becomes almost a visual diary of their relationship — envisioned or in fact.

TAKEN INDIVIDUALLY, not all of the works in this exhibition would merit such wide attention, but as part of this 15-year exploration of the artist's response to one model in different moods, in different seasons, they become an important link in the total story. Leonard B. Andrews, the Pennsylv-

ania-based publisher and philanthropist, who bought the entire body of work from Wyeth in 1988, was here for the opening as he has been for each opening since the tour began in Washington, D.C.

Admission to "Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures" is by reserved date/time ticket only. They are \$4 for adults, \$3 for seniors and students, and \$1 for children 6-12. For tickets, call 832-2730 or write Ticket Office, Detroit Institute of Arts, 5200 Woodward, Detroit, 48202.

There will be two lectures in conjunction with the exhibit: 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 4, John Wilmerding, professor of American art, Princeton University; and 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 11, Robert Hughes, art critic, Time magazine.

Hope Palmer will give a drawing workshop for young people, grades 8-12 from 1-4 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 3. The exhibit will continue through Sunday, Jan. 23. Hours are 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Closed Nov. 34, Dec. 23, 24, Dec. 31, Jan. 1.