

New owner has a better idea for the home that Ford built

By MIKE SCANLON

Cheek by jowl with the Garden City Kmart store is, inobtrusively, 2,400 square feet of history.

It won't be there long. "My plan is to move the house and sell the property within two years," said Don Sullivan.

Sullivan thinks the property is worth plenty, but he doesn't care. It's the 2,400 square feet of house that matters. And it's the house he wants to give away.

Free. He probably won't have as much trouble as you would with a litter of kittens.

The house was built in Dearborn by Henry Ford in 1891 to specifications laid down by his then-new bride, Clara, who wanted a square house. The place was moved to Garden City in 1952. Sullivan, a Ford Motor Co. engineer who bought the house in May, wants to move it back.

"I like Garden City, it's a nice town, but the house belongs in Dearborn. Who am I to argue with history?" he said.

Ford, whose main claim to fame is adapting the assembly line to automobile production, was not the inventor of the automobile. But he did make one of the first, and Sullivan says Ford sketched the initial plans for it in the house. He drew the plans on a couch that now occupies an upstairs bedroom in the Beechwood street home.

ALL THIS may be little more than a matter of idle curiosity to you. Ford memorabilia is hardly in short supply around Garden City, a town that might not even exist if Henry hadn't thrown together a thing called the Rouge plant a ways down the city's main street — Ford Road.

Old and new Ford factories, farms, water mills, museums and soybean fields are all within a 20-minute drive. It's enough to make one live about things Ford.

To Sullivan, however, living in that house, simply owning it, is . . . well, it's sort of like being 12 years old in a world where the Fourth of July, Christmas Eve, Halloween and your birthday are all celebrated 365 days a year.

Sullivan, who is from Wilmington, N.C., considers his first museum purchase to be a high point in his life, and ranks as a Ford fanatic of the first order.

"When we got married, I told my wife that if I could have the job I really wanted, I'd be a mechanic at a Ford garage," said Sullivan.

THE HOUSE is in good condition, considering that it's two years shy of its century mark. Sullivan had to repair kitchen ceiling plaster damaged when the house was moved to Garden City, and he had to renovate the kitchen. The renovation was required by Sullivan's wife, Marion, a prerequisite to her agreeing to the couple selling a Dearborn bungalow they bought when Sullivan moved to the Detroit area.

Sullivan says that bungalow, by the way, was about 1,200 square feet, half the Ford house's size, "but we had more room because of the modern design."

A variety of woods were used to construct the frame house, much of them cut at the house's original site, the northeast corner of Southfield and Ford Road.

Modifications were made to the house in 1936, when plumbing, electricity and an oil-fired furnace were added before Ford gave the house to an employee named Bob Smith, who later quit after he developed non-dairy whipped cream derived from soybeans. It was Smith who sold the house to Sullivan.

SULLIVAN DISCOVERED the house existed from a tour guide at another Ford residence, who knew only that it was in Garden City and near a Kmart store.

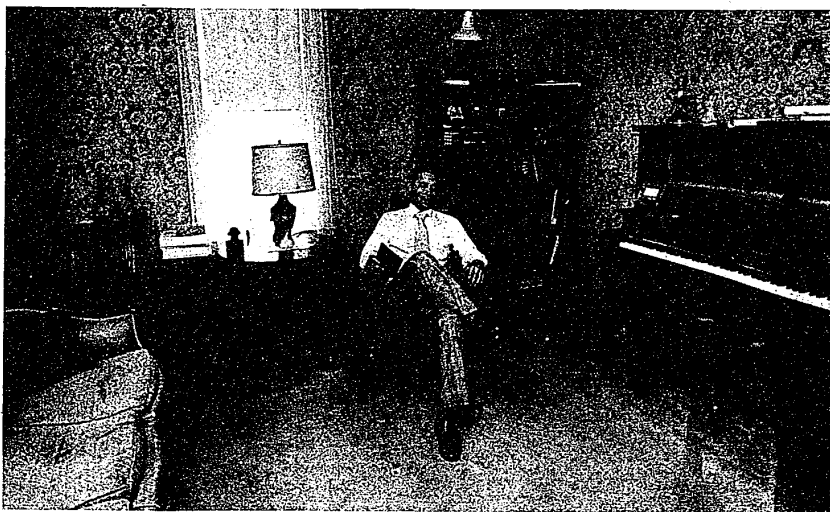
"I went up and down this street knocking on doors. I knew it was a frame house, so I just tried them all," Sullivan said. Once he found the house, he also found out it had been for sale for five years.

"Five years! I couldn't believe it. It was waiting for me to get here," exclaimed Sullivan.

Sullivan has plans for the house. Sears, Roebuck & Co. make paint commercials featuring paint being applied to old houses, and he wants his house to be one of them. The house is soon to be named to the state historical houses registry, and Sullivan wants to use that for leverage in getting it named to the national registry of historic homes.

"I think this house is a shoe-in myself, based solely on the fact that Henry Ford was who he was. He only built one house — this is the one."

Eventually, Sullivan wants to parlay all this into land — a two-acre Dearborn site to move the house to. He wants to live in it, then donate it to the Dearborn Historical Commission after he moves out.



Don Sullivan calls this place home. Other folks have, too — one of them was Henry Ford. Sullivan believes Ford prepared preliminary drawings of his first automobile in this room. Behind him is a desk used by Ford. (Photo by Bob Woodring)

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