

# Servitude & Surrender

BY CHARITY VOGEL

*How I survived a long, hot summer steeped in the Wright sort of madness.*

**T**HE SUMMER I turned 16, I needed money. Not for the typical things a teenage girl wants—clothes, cosmetics, movies. No, I needed money to buy a horse. The Arabian mare cost a thousand dollars, more than I had ever contemplated. Since I would be commuting on a 10-speed, I needed a job close to home. And that was how Frank Lloyd Wright entered my life.

Next door to my parents' home stood Graycliff, the rambling stucco and stone manor the renowned architect had built starting in 1926 for one of Buffalo's wealthiest men, the industrialist Darwin Martin, and his wife, Isabelle. Graycliff was big and gloomy. It was old and drafty. In the early 1990s, it was owned by the Piarist Fathers, a European order of priests who had bought the place from the Martin children in the 1950s. On Sundays, my family attended Mass in its chapel, but the place had never really appealed to me. When I overheard my parents talking about how the housekeeper at Graycliff had abruptly quit, I realized that the house might be more than the neighborhood landmark. It might be a place to find work! The Wright place at the right time.

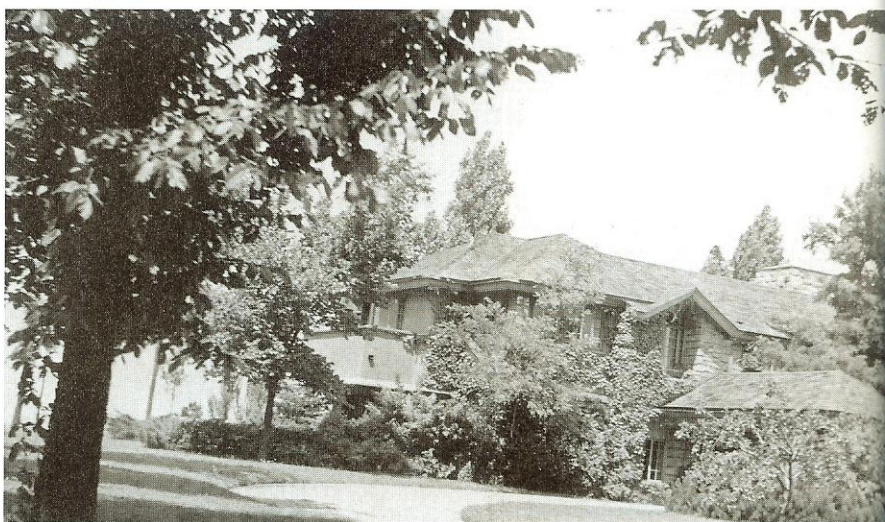
One bright June morning, I gathered up my courage and knocked on Graycliff's front door. An elderly priest answered, and I offered my services as housekeeper. I must have looked particularly determined, or maybe they were desperate, because later that same day, I found myself in a frayed apron, trying to figure out how

to work the soot-covered gas burners in Wright's cavernous manor kitchen.

I spent that summer living intimately with Frank Lloyd Wright.

It was memorable. It was educational. It was—let me be blunt—exhausting. Perhaps I overestimated my

IN THE SAME PERIOD when the Martins sold the property to the religious order, my mother's family had moved in next door. Picture the scene: the angles and planes of an overlooked Wright masterpiece, preserved in cultured majesty by a blue-blooded family. The wooden Victorian summer house next door occupied by a sprawling Polish-American family that included four energetic children (my mother among them), and various collateral relatives who spoke only Polish or heavily accented English. Overseeing all were my grandparents, who had bought their 40-acre plot through backbreaking effort, earning every dollar it took by run-



abilities, thinking I could clean and care for a Wright mansion all by myself. Maybe I simply met the maestro when I was too young. Because at age 16, Frank Lloyd Wright was the man who made my life miserable.

Graycliff is 20 miles south of Buffalo, in a hamlet along tall bluffs overlooking Lake Erie. The approach takes you on a curving road past stands of pines. From the windows at night, you can see the lights of Buffalo glimmering over the lake, a crystal necklace on a bed of blue velvet.



ning a tavern and fish-fry restaurant in Buffalo. Grandpa never knew he was buying next door to Wright, and he wouldn't have cared.

If there was disjunction, at age 16, I pushed it aside. All I knew was that Wright forced me to crawl along baseboards searching for electrical sockets. He was a man whose vision for the kitchen extended to special, low-basined sinks for Isabelle Martin's flower cutting—but he didn't think the laundry needed to be anywhere convenient. He appreciated windows—Graycliff has more than 100—but apparently didn't understand what it meant to clean them.

"The Martins asked for a simple summer cottage, and of course then he built this marvelous country estate," explains Reine Hauser, executive director of the Graycliff Conservancy, which is working to restore and refurbish the home in a \$7.2 million project. Nonetheless, she says, by Wright's standards, "Graycliff is an extremely livable house."

People who say that have never tried to vacuum it. I remember lugging heavy, old-fashioned vacuuming machines up and down Wright's main staircase, a tight switchback affair, while struggling to piece together three or four moth-eaten extension cords. Windows on the second floor were encased by an outdoor balcony, which was lovely, but it made scouring the 150 or so window panes more difficult.

"It was a house designed to be

run by an army of servants," admits Patrick Mahoney, the Buffalo architect who is president of the Graycliff Conservancy's Board of Directors. Mahoney, a Wright fan who has visited 405 of the roughly 410 buildings by the architect known to be standing, says that the mysteries of Graycliff can be explained in one word: Isabelle.

Graycliff was Mrs. Martin's project with Wright. Darwin Martin went so far as to tell Wright that Isabelle, not he, was the client to please. A woman who had badly impaired vision, Isabelle wanted Graycliff to be a beautiful and breezy home full of light, and easy on her eyes.

"The main house is a very inefficient building in terms of cost," says Mahoney. "It has a lot of surface area, a lot of planes, compared to the space inside. Mrs. Martin was asking Wright for a brightly lit interior. He rejected that. What he gave her instead was an evenly lit interior."

Sunlight comes in through plain glass windows (unlike the colored glass Wright had used in the Martins' city home). The only room that Isabelle wasn't perfectly satisfied with was the one she had forced Wright to design her way instead of his: without windows or cross-breezes. Unluckily, it was her own bedroom. (The priests had turned it into a library.)

"Isabelle was said to be the woman who wouldn't let Frank Lloyd Wright build what he wanted," says Mahoney. "But Wright still made it his own: It's his own interpretation of what she asked for."

BY THE TIME I landed on the doorstep, rooms that had once been sweeping, open spaces had been partitioned into small cubicles for living, study, and storage. The kitchen's massive 10-burner range, restaurant-sized sinks, and



huge stainless-steel prep table would have delighted Isabelle's servants, but I was only one teenage girl. Fixing lunch took an hour, with me sweating as I trotted between pantry, cooler room, and outdoor freezer.

"Isabelle and Darwin had come from nothing, so they did care about their servants," says Hauser, the executive director. "That kind of big kitchen was unusual for Wright. Typically his kitchens were very dark and small. Wright didn't cook."

By the end of that summer, Indian Silvera was in her new stall. With school starting, I wouldn't have the time to be the priests' housekeeper; I am sure they were secretly glad.

The last of the priests sold the estate in 1996, and the property was acquired by local preservationists who have made it their goal to restore Isabelle Martin's summer retreat. My family still lives next door. I'm past my teenage bitterness. Sometimes it takes a little maturity to appreciate the idiosyncrasies that make a person, or a house, who they are. ■

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**THE GRAYCLIFF CONSERVANCY** offers a variety of tours of the house from April until November, and limited tours during the winter. Reservations are required. Graycliff, 6472 Old Lake Shore Road Derby, New York (716) 947-9217, [graycliffestate.org](http://graycliffestate.org)