



Lights, Camera, Narrative

BY CHARITY VOGEL

What I learned when my house was on TV.

I OWN A THREE-STORY, shingled 1898 Queen Anne Folk Victorian with a pretty cool past. So I applied to the popular HGTV show “If Walls Could Talk” in response to a local casting call. With zillions of great old houses out there, I didn’t think mine would stand a chance.

Here’s the funny thing: My old house got picked. In fact, within 20 minutes of e-mailing them the exhaustive application, the phone rang, and producers of the show were asking if they could book us. They wanted to come—are you ready for this?—in two weeks’ time.

Yes, *two weeks*. So instead of high-fiving my husband, T.J., and yelling “Woo-hoo, HGTV! Where’s the Champagne?” I yelled, “Where’s the steam cleaner?! Is it too late to wallpaper the hallway?”

What follows is a brief memoir of my HGTV experience. How do they actually make these shows happen?

Read on to find out, and then apply. I dare you.

Producers for HGTV need to know a lot about your house before they can schedule you. When my aunt, Kath-

leen Mathews, heard about the casting call through her historical society job, she urged us to apply: “You know the whole story of your house.”

True—we are such geeky owners, we spent five years learning about our old house. For example, we’d read all the editions of the *Angola Record* newspaper published in our town between 1897 and 1905, and scoured the local history museum. We knew the house was built by Frank F. Watt, a talented young conductor on the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railroad (the first man to conduct the Twentieth Century between Buffalo and Toledo). Sadly, Watt was ill and died at 48. Towards the end of his life, he sold our house, which became a music school and then, during World War II, a rural maternity hospital.

Knowing the full narrative, as it were, gave us a distinct advantage. We’d gotten our hands on a copy of the six-page questionnaire that High Noon Entertainment, the Colorado-based company that makes “Walls,” asks potential participants to fill out. *Architectural details? Reno-*



vation history? Previous owners? Easy enough. I sat down in the library with my laptop and got started. When I was done, I e-mailed it over, and figured I'd heard the last of it. But we were on!

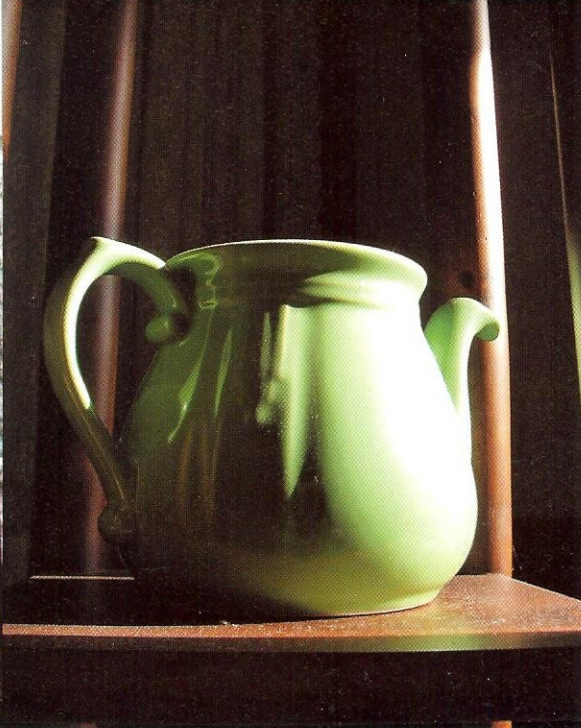
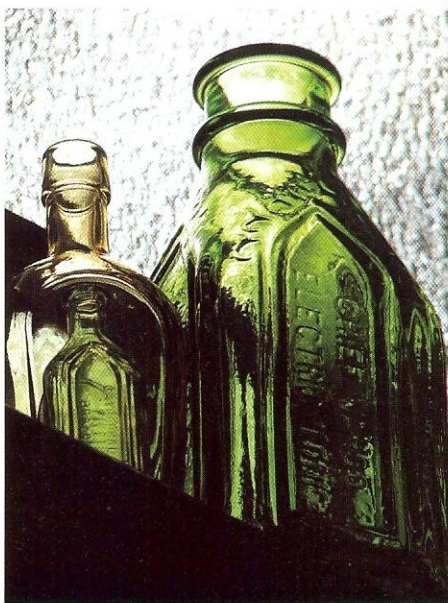
The people who make "Walls" later told us they look for homeowners. And "we look for them to be energetic and outgoing," said Jenna Friederich, who handles research and casting.

No need to do anything special to the house, Friederich told us. All we were to do was wear clothes that would look good on TV (no busy patterns that clash with the wallpaper). We'd have to wear microphones the whole day, clipped to our shirts. So we picked plain shirts and tried to wait patiently. But really . . . what would you do if you knew HGTV cameras were coming? Exactly. I cleaned like a woman possessed. I practically vacuumed the air. The night before the shoot, I did a final walk-through and tried to add a little Victorian glam. On the church pew in the hallway, I spread a throw and placed



TOP: The Victorian house today, beloved by its current owners and ready for its close-up. **ABOVE:** Historical perspective: the house before 1920.

RIGHT: Glass bottles were found in the basement coal bin of the old house. **FAR RIGHT:** The couple also recovered this jade-color pitcher, intact, from the basement coal bin.



vintage schoolbooks next to a glass apple. In the library, I put my silver tea service and a bud vase next to a wing chair. I hung a fresh autumn wreath, bought in a panic for \$35 at the craft store, on the oak front door. I reluctantly gave up on re-wallpapering the hall. We were as ready as we could be.

The crew arrived on the taping day at 8 a.m. sharp: Lori Allred, the producer and a Colorado resident, and Jim O'Halloran, the cameraman from Boston. The two often work together, so there was a friendly vibe right from the start. I laid out muffins, danish, and big vats of coffee, which didn't hurt.

The day began with Jim shooting scene-setting footage of the house and grounds. He spent an hour outside, then another hour inside, taping everything from attic to bathrooms. "Are you going to use all this?" I asked, wor-

ried that all of America was going to see my shower. Jim said maybe not, but they liked to be thorough.

Then Lori and Jim photographed T.J. and me on our front lawn, while interviewing us about how we came to buy the house. Squinting in the bright sunlight, we stuttered to give answers that would sound semi-intelligent. Meanwhile, neighbors drove down the street, honking and waving. "I guess it's kind of a small town," I apologized. Jim and Lori grinned, waited for the ruckus to end, then started the tape over again.

The show "If Walls Could Talk" is about houses with unique histories. So Lori and Jim focused a lot of time on the various artifacts we had found while doing renovation work. They taped us re-enacting these "finds": a sea-foam green 1920s pottery teapot uncovered in the coal bin, an antique perfume box that was behind a bedroom wall, railroad insulators and equipment from earlier years. Because every shot had to be redone multiple times from different angles, it was draining. But we laughed a lot between takes.

Amazingly, while the cameras were rolling, we even uncovered another little bit of the past! Lori asked me to crawl under our staircase. Underneath the central rise, there's a small closet-like storage space with some crude wooden shelving. We had always wondered when it had been added; the wood seemed cheap, unlike the oak of the staircase, yet the "secret" shelves were unquestionably practical. We postulated that maybe the shelves had



LEFT: Homeowner Charity Vogel and Lori Allred, the HGTV producer, share a moment on the front stairway.

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HOW TO GET YOUR HOUSE ON TV

■ **KNOW THE SHOWS.** A network that focuses on houses and gardens needs a steady stream of homeowner contributors to fill dozens of shows. That's the good news! Find out all about each show to position your property best. Start on the web—hgtv.com is a great resource—then watch episodes to get a feel for style and content. "If Walls Could Talk" is quite different from "House Hunters"; "Design on a Dime" is worlds away from "My House is Worth What?" Narrow your search to programs that seem like a fit. To get specific rules governing the programs, click on the "Be On HGTV" tab at the top of the home page.

■ **KNOW YOUR HOME'S VITAL STATS BEFORE YOU CONTACT ANYBODY.** On the first phone call, the HGTV people asked us about square footage, year of construction, architect and builder, and more. Luckily we knew the facts, so we could answer quickly and with confidence.

■ **MAKE A TIMELINE.** Before this experience, I had collected bits of the history of our 1898 house like a patchwork quilt. In advance of the taping, we typed out a timeline of previous

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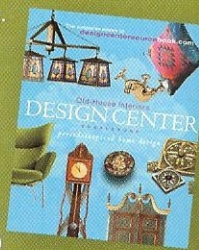
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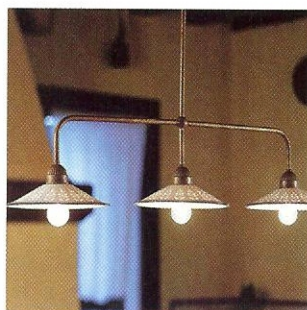
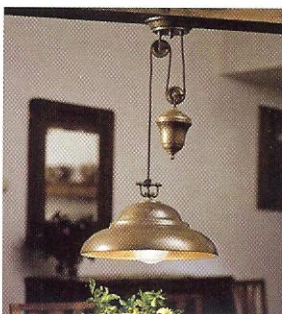
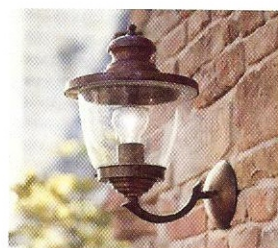
ABOVE: Producer Lori Allred and HGTV photographer Jim O'Halloran flank married homeowners T. J. Pignataro and Charity Vogel (center).

owners and high points of the house's history, as well as a parallel timeline alluding to important world and domestic events. (The year our house was built saw the explosion of the U.S.S. Maine—"Remember the Maine!"—and the start of the Spanish-American War, the death of Bismarck, the resignation of King Edward, and the Klondike Gold Rush.) That handy four-page outline kept us organized throughout during interviews; we even passed out copies on taping day.

■ **COLLECT ARTIFACTS.** You may be asked to show off things you've found in your house. And you may be asked to provide pictures showing your home before and during any renovations, so take lots of photos of your projects, and keep them sorted and labeled.

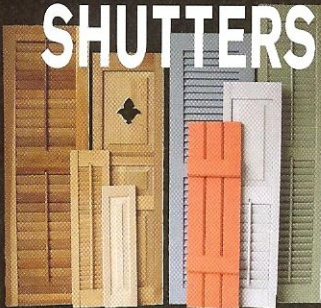
■ **FIND A NARRATIVE.** A compelling narrative will set your house apart from the pack. It might be a personal story that shows your emotional connection to the house. Or it might concern the house itself. If your house was once the site of something important, play up that angle in your pitch. Likewise, if you have an intriguing personal tie to the property—maybe you're living in a family home handed down for generations, for instance—emphasize that aspect. What people like best is a good story. ★

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