

How Lucky

6 things to love about old houses

Walk into my kitchen by way of the side porch, and you'll pass through an old door frame that makes me smile every time I see it. It's a plain wooden frame—not much to look at, but it's got a special feature: names. There are dozens and dozens of them scrawled into the wood. They start about knee high and rise more than six feet off the ground—higher than I can read, anyway. Most have dates scratched next to them, and little hash marks to show how tall each name—Dan, Katie, Josh, Bryan—once stood.

I don't know these people, except for one. My husband, T.J., added our niece, Emma, to the lineup a few months back,

when she stood exactly three feet tall. But that doesn't bother me a bit. In fact, I like not knowing who all these long-grown youngsters are. I can picture them in my mind's eye, standing with heels pressed up against the wall and heads thrown back, serious, hopeful. Waiting anxiously to see if they've added another inch—haven't we all been there? Rubbing it in to their siblings if they had; eating extra helpings of vegetables if they hadn't. T.J. and I are renovating this Victorian house, a blend of Folk and Shingle styles, built in 1898 by a conductor on the Michigan & Southern Railroad for his family—but we don't ever plan to sand that door

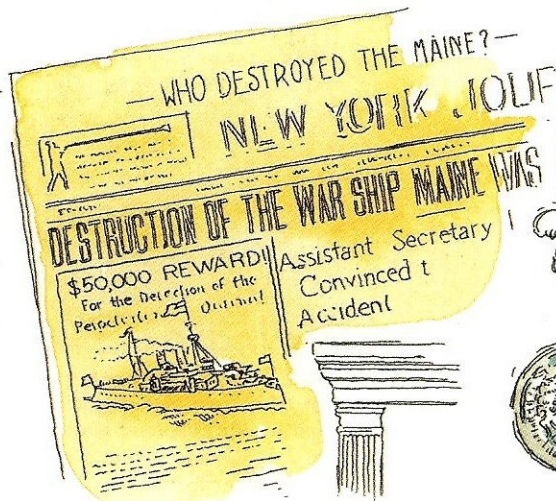
frame down and refinish it. Why would we? The door frame is the natural place in this old house for those measurements, right at the entrance to a warm Victorian-era kitchen where swarms of children must once have played. The list of names at our kitchen door symbolizes some of the very best things about living in an old house. Every time I pass it, I reflect on how lucky we are—all of us who own old homes. Sometimes it helps to remind ourselves why.

THE LENS OF TIME

When you live in an old house and work on it, you gain a new perspective on time. You appreciate how it passes, how much has changed over the decades, and what it can teach us.

After we bought our house, I went to the library and called up microfilm for the *Angola Record*, the newspaper published in our small town in the late 1800s. I was amazed to read everything from hard-hitting news items like the U.S.S. *Maine* disaster—the battleship explosion that launched the United States into the Spanish American War and gave birth to

History lurks around every corner...



We Are

BY CHARITY VOGEL

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES NOEL SMITH





Basement finds
serve days of
tea, wine, or roses

the phrase "Remember the Maine!"—to coverage of the lively local social scene. Seemingly every time someone from nearby Buffalo visited this rural village, the paper noted it. Reports of dinner parties and purchases of new carriages and farm equipment were also newsworthy back in 1898.

I was ecstatic to find that the paper also ran small items about local construction projects, allowing me to follow the building of our house. The house was constructed over five months during the summer, and when it was done the *Record* praised it as a "fine new home" for the community. Just imagining the pride the original owners, Frank and Mary Watt, took in those glowing words made me feel honored to be its caretaker now.

QUALITY MATERIALS

Here's a best kept secret of owning an old home. It's not all about the past; it's about living in the present, too—in the best possible way. Admit it. You've visited a fancy new home in an upscale subdivision, only to find yourself surreptitiously inspecting the baseboards, doorknobs, crown moldings, and windows with a hint of, well, noblesse oblige. You think about your own heart pine floors and massive oak staircase, your stained glass windows and solid metal hardware, and you feel a bit sorry for people who don't live among materials of such beauty, style, and richness.

Sure, we may pay higher heating bills; maybe our doors are a bit draftier. We usually don't have central air conditioning, and washing those third-floor windows on a big old Victorian can be a real challenge. Still, this is the only way to live, isn't it?

THE COMFORT LEVEL

Four reassuring words you can say about old houses are *you can't mess up*. Well, in extreme instances you can, but in general, working on an old house gives you a certain level of security—a very large safety net, as it were. Old houses were built to last, and if you do your homework and work carefully they are very forgiving of goof-ups.

For example, you can try a cool faux-finish technique on the parlor walls, and if it doesn't work out, so what? The room's been redecorated 25 times since the house was built, and it's still a willing canvas, so go back and try again. Attempt to find those pocket doors hidden away behind drywall. Try to install a vintage school-house sink. Try to look under the linoleum for hardwood.

When you do hit on the right look for



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your old house, you'll know it. The very walls seem to breathe a sigh of relief.

THE EXERCISE

You don't need to spend money on a gym membership when you own an old home. The fact is, you'll burn approximately 8,000 calories a day on stair-climbing alone. Take our house; it has four separate flights of stairs (not counting the ones outside) for a total of 52 steps. Try running laundry from the washing machine in the basement to the bedrooms on the second floor with that kind of a setup—it's a cardiovascular workout par excellence.

Then there's all the yard work that comes from having mature trees on your property. The five huge maples surrounding our house—each over 100 years old—drop enough leaves each fall to provide a feel-the-burn raking marathon for an entire football team, let alone two people. We always lose a few pounds in October.

REVELATIONS

When you own an old house, every project brings a fresh crop of discoveries. You're

constantly making little finds—either physical artifacts or eureka moments. (So that's why the wall sounded hollow! There's a doorway under there!) That means you're learning more all the time about the structure in which you live and the people who inhabited it before you.

One day, when T.J. and I cleaned out an old coal bin in the basement, he found a sea-green pottery teapot in perfect condition save for a missing lid. With a little research on the Internet, we learned we had unearthed a "Pour Right Tricolorator," popular in the early 20th century.

Now every spring I fill the pot with fresh-cut lilacs, set it on our kitchen table, and as I do, I think about how it came to be there. Was it a wedding gift? A birthday present for the lady of the house? I speculate that, when it was no longer fashionable, someone put the pot in storage in the basement where it dropped into the old cellar, forgotten. However it got there, it's beautiful—and it's part of our home's unique past.

We have made plenty of other finds, too. Digging around in our yard, we found

old bottles in yellow and green and amber glass. Intact and lovely, they now sit proudly in our library. A bedroom renovation yielded a perfume box from the 1940s that had fallen—or perhaps been tucked away—behind some crumbling plaster. We've found coins, newspapers, photographs. We've picked up clues, too, by uncovering long-sealed-over doors, about what the floor plan of the house looked like 107 years ago. It's changed a lot since then, and finding these clues helped us figure out how to make the house look as much like it once did as we are able.

These treasures are much more than mementos of a completed project. Each one is a marker, pointing us toward new insights about the house in which we live and the families who have called it home.

THE GHOSTS

Okay, maybe your house doesn't have ethereal occupants, but we believe ours does. We think it's either Mary Watt, wife of the railroad conductor who built our house and the first woman to live here, or Emily, from whom the Watts bought the land. And we're not alone. Ask enough people who live in very old houses, and you're bound to turn up more than a few examples of homes that have, well, guests, as we like to think of them.

One day, a contractor was working on our second floor alone. When we returned, he sheepishly asked us if we'd "ever seen anything strange" in the house.

"Like what?" we asked. "Like a woman's shape in the hallway upstairs," he replied. He'd seen it while he was working—just for a minute. It had crossed the hall and disappeared. We just smiled. Maybe so, we said...maybe so. 🏠

Charity Vogel, a writer, journalist, and college instructor who lives in an old Shingle/Folk Victorian in Angola, New York, is currently working on a novel about her house.