

# The grand old dame of Bradford

It's been a convent and home for the rich in past 111 years

It stands like a great old lady on Bradford's main street, its ancient facade belonging to a bygone era.

But time has clipped the regal bearing of the building, wrinkling its joints and the once stony windows that surveyed a street filled with babies and marriages are now broken and empty.

Originally a home for the town's wealthy and prominent, the 1876 mansion was also used as a convent and as an apartment building.

The building was stripped of the last vestige of grandeur in the last five years when the Town of Bradford and its owners were embroiled in a legal controversy over ownership.

## PLAGUED BY VANDALS

Left in limbo, the house was plagued by vandals and thieves. It was then that Bradford resident Jim Culbert launched his one-man crusade to have the house returned to its former glory.

The town council wanted to tear the house down to make way for a library, but now as the dispute with owner Fred Pincus is settled and the town takes possession under a new deed, the future of The Old Convent is once again up in the air.

While Mayor Don DePree says it isn't necessarily feasible to return the complete house, he plans to hold a public meeting for residents' input into the building's fate.

But 59-year-old Culbert insists the town landmark should be preserved intact and restored "as a tribute to those men and women who gave us our historical heritage."

He spent today an hour in libraries and registry offices and spoke to past owners in an effort to trace the heritage of the historic house.

The building is steeped in the town's history, built in 1871 when John and Eliza Armstrong sold their three-acre parcel of land bound by Lattin, Barrie and Moore streets to John MacLean Stevenson for \$1,200.

Stevenson wanted a unique design for his dream house and on returning from a trip to Scotland, the Bradford lawyer brought back plans based for a Spanish castle.

At that time, English architects, and later the wealthy in America, were copying the design of Queen Victoria's and Prince Albert's country retreat on the Isle of Wight.

## Debbie Blair



It soon became apparent to curious onlookers that the house under construction in 1874 was to feature this popular Italianate style.

Topping the majestic house was a widow's walk or Italian campanile, an octagonal tower with windows on each side that provided a commanding view of Bradford and the surrounding countryside.

Inside the house, an ornamental, graceful staircase spirals upwards from the large foyer. The floor revealed that it is made of boards from the lumber yard throughout the house.

Off the entrance lie the formal living room with its three large windows, separated by pocket doors from a game room with oak panels, fireplace mantel and brood ceiling beams.

## BEAUTIFUL INTERIOR

A rectangular fireplace and large picture window grace the music room at the front, connected by an arched doorway to the bathroom.

The back of the main house houses the large dining room and kitchen with wainscoted walls. Behind the kitchen lies a storage room for food and meat, entry. Stairways lead to the basement and second floor.

On the second floor, a distinctive 19th-century window once operated the stair landing from the hallway, but was recently smashed by vandals. That window was the sole source of natural light for the hallway.

The upstairs landing and hallway floor are made of oak with intricate designs. Three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a dressing room complete the second floor.

Another spiral staircase leads up to the owner's landing and widow's walk from where the barber can see the lake to the northwest, headquarters to the southeast, the marsh to the south and Bradford to the north.

It is this that Culbert is fighting to keep from becoming a memory, lost to the waves of progress.

The original house was razed in by Stevenson, the next year 1877. Later that year it was sold to Robert Brigham for \$2,500.

Seventeen years later, Robert's widow Caroline sold the house for \$2,000 during a depression. James Rivley, the owner from 1894 to 1896, took over the house, calling it Fairview.

The deed passed through several hands until famed Canadian politician and author Rex Tipton R. Young of Bradford bought the house for \$2,500 in 1953.

Samuel Alphonse Lodge, the minister made it his home shortly after marrying one of Bradford's most attractive ladies, Libbie Brigham. After his death in 1960, the house was again sold, going to Vermont Lakes for \$2,900.

## RENOVATIONS

The Lakes family, which operated the busy Bradford Flour Mill on Holland Street, made several repairs to the house, replacing the veranda with one large one.

In 1929, Samuel's son Gilbert continued renovations, adding a bathroom, changing the location of the driveway and entrance steps as well as sheathing the home for warmth.

Artie Light, the town's popular home and lawn builder, was commissioned to do the renovations, converting a bedroom into a dressing room and building the unique bathroom with toilet, shower, bath and toilet that still stands today. A garage and stable were added to the rear of the house.

Light began selling off portions of land surrounding the house in 1945, and in 1949, a fire sale sign went up again on the front lawn of what was then called Fairview.

The Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation for the Diocese of Toronto bought the house for \$10,000 but soon sold it to the Ontario Order of the Daughters of London, a group of teaching nuns.

However, the plot of land south to the house was retained and St. Mary's Catholic school was built.

The steady erosion panned through an era of grandeur and splendor during the last several decades becoming a concrete driveway and that in 1969, it was converted into an apartment house by John and Maria Moore.

Debbie says bylaws prohibiting

such use, it was used as a multiple family dwelling for 17 years until 1981 when the 105-year-old building was sold to Fred and Betty-Lou Pincus for \$20,000.

The Pincus hoped to restore the house but had only removed plaster from the inner and outer walls, leaving its interior for a warm and comfortable home, when they were halted by a certificate of its remains filed by the town in February, 1982.

The town had issued a stop-work order and Pincus in turn sued the town.

Mayor DePree said although the town had offered to buy the house and passed a deposit, the Pincus stopped it with the cash.

An agreement was reached this month, ending the lawsuit, and the town will purchase the house from the Pincus.

The mayor said council will discuss ways that the building can be used by residents, adding the neighboring old St. Mary's school is well-used as a nursery school and community meeting hall.

While DePree says he realizes some problems will ward the building retained for historical reasons, he feels it would cost too much. Instead, certain parts such as the facade or tower could be kept, he adds.

## COMMUNITY WARS

The dispute over ownership was of little concern to Culbert, a well-adjusted average lover and owner of The Farmhouse Doctor. He only wishes to see the house restored without the loss of its original character.

Culbert says the house could have a number of community uses, adding if windows were retained, it would make a beautiful library.

He estimates the 111-year-old house would need about \$250,000 in repairs including new plumbing, drywall, insulation and doors and windows.

"It may be in shambles but it's never changed," he says. "It still is beautiful."

The mayor says council isn't in a hurry to make a decision about the building but will likely decide its fate by the end of the year.

Until then, the city grand old lady, the house patiently waits, awaiting the passage of time and age with wisdom while memories dance inside.