

THE HOME
OF
RUSSELL and ELIZABETH MEDINGER

Submitted by:

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15 December 1988

History 260

The history of the home owned and built by Russell and Elizabeth Medinger in 1954 is more closely tied than usual to the two people who created it. It is the culmination of a dream a man and a woman have shared since they began dating in 1928, at the age of 17.

The couple grew up in Reading, PA, where they, as Betty (Elizabeth) describes it, were from "simple, plain people", never desiring or needing anything grand or ostentatious.

During their nine year courtship, while Russell was establishing his floral business, Betty went to college and began a teaching career. From the outset, their chief desire was to build a home that reflected traditional values of warmth and simplicity. Consequently, they spent all of their free time walking throughout their home town area looking at the different styles of architecture, though they held an initial interest in a "Southern Colonial Style". Betty laughingly says of this time, "we walked and walked, all the time,..... everywhere!" in search of just the right house - a theme that would become prevalent in all of their future endeavors.

On one of Russell's lone expeditions, he came across one house in particular, fell in love with it, and rushed to Betty saying, "You have got to see this house!", immediately taking her to it. She recalls that when they got there he asked her "Wouldn't you just love to live in a house like this?", obviously knowing her well enough to know what her answer would be.

Betty describes the house they found as a Colonial, French Normandy peasant type, "It was just beautiful!". It represented all that they wanted in a home: the feeling of simplicity and warmth, a place that was inviting; not grand or pretentious. They immediately found that the architect of this house was a

local Reading man by the name of Miles Dechent who specialized in historic renovations and colonial design.

He was well known for his work with the Pennsylvania Historical Commission, one of particular note, was the renovation of Conrad Weiser's homestead in Womelsdorf, east of Reading. Weiser had been William Penn's interpreter for the Lenni-Lenape Indian tribe of the Delaware River Valley.

In finding this house and subsequently the architect who designed it, the Medingers began a journey laced with serendipity. "Knowing all the time what we wanted,....isn't it amazing?, she said incredulously, "we have always known what we wanted from the beginning".

The Medingers, sharing all the same interests and concerns as Miles, immediately "hit it off" and began what became a lifelong friendship. They commissioned him in the mid-1930's to design a ca. 1700 hillside farmhouse, true to the historical scale and proportion, as well as detail. The plans he drew were for a 4 level house, with 5 rooms and bath comprising only 1125 square feet and constructed entirely of uncut fieldstone. To add to the feeling of warmth, the interior would have open beam wood ceilings, wide pine flooring, and the fieldstone walls would be plastered and painted, of course setting in a 3" chair railing. All doorways would be heavily framed, and all would have doors, just not entrances. An authentic walk-in fireplace would be in the main living room, as well as a 'regular' fireplace in the bedroom immediately above the living room.

The four levels were to reflect the colonial tradition of building a first structure for the immediate necessity for shelter. Additional rooms and stories were constructed as necessary and as funds became available to do so.

When asked how they knew in the 1930's how many rooms they would need, Betty responded by pointing out the flexibility of the design which by its very nature allowed for additions if they were needed. By the time the house was built in 1954, the family size was already established, and the plans were fine, but with one regret. "Having 2 daughters and one bath! Why we didn't put another bathroom in is beyond me!", she laughed. "I certainly had the chance to add another bathroom, if not on the first floor, at least in the basement!", since she had been in charge of rewriting the specifications when certain changes needed to be made due to the technological differences from the time the plans were drawn.

From the time Russell and Betty had decided upon the type of home they would build some day, they began collecting not only furniture from that period, but also hand-forged iron hardware and nails, finding wooden pegs and lumber for construction, as well as hand-blown panes of glass (some imported from Sweden). They traveled extensively in their search, looking for those things that would fit their period house perfectly. As Betty said, "We waited to find just the right piece, it it wasn't just right, we wouldn't buy it".

They also began a collection of antique Terra Cotta roof tiles made by Black Cat Pottery of Oley, PA., in business from the mid-1700's to 1868. Their design is unique in that the potter made fairly deep grooves, with his (or her) fingers in the wet clay, running down the length of the tile vertically to establish a natural run off for rain water. The Medingers collected them from all over Pennsylvania, sometimes just buying one at a time, and paying from .25¢ to \$1.00 for each - they were able to amass an astonishing 5000 tiles.

In all, they spent over 20 years collecting and they remain amazed that it came together as it has. Smiling with

well-deserved satisfaction and conviction, Betty observed "It was a labor of love. We held close to our dream, working long and hard to make it come true.....we never gave up. It proves that if you have a dream that you really believe in, just never give up," she emphasized, "you can make it come true."

The first construction bid of \$8000 in 1937, the year they were married, dismayed them, as it was during The Depression. Moving to Philadelphia in the 1940's, they slowly began to invest in real estate to help their dream along. Initially, they had purchased two other lots when they found the land the house now sits on, purchasing it in 1949. The lot was the perfect choice for them -- not only because the contour and setting of the land was well-suited to their needs, but also because the lot was situated in a beautiful neighborhood in close proximity to Russell's business in Chestnut Hill.

The 1½ acre corner lot had originally been an estate owned by the Hubbard family, but the heirs were unable to afford its upkeep and finally tore down the main house, leaving the carriage house in tact. The Medingers decided to build on the corner land, selling the carriage house as well as the lower 3/4 acre, with the only stipulation to the new owners that they build to blend in character with the rest of the neighborhood - Gothic, Georgian, Italianate, whatever, just not in the new modern ranch house style that was becoming very popular!

Around the same time that they purchased the ground, they were on a 'collecting' drive that took them through Paoli, PA., when they happened to pass a Toll House designed exactly like what they were planning to build. Completely astonished, they sought the owner who happened to be in the building, as it was his office. The serendipity that seemed to follow them was certainly there on that particular day. As it turned out, the owner, Mr. Gable, was a building contractor who immediately shared in the Medinger's enthusiasm for constructing an authentic period house.

However, their good luck in finding land, in collecting, and in finding both an architect and a builder sympathetic to their plans virtually ground to a halt in applying for a building permit in Springfield Township, Montgomery County.

Not only have the Medingers established a unique house, but they directly influenced the course of Pennsylvania law in regard to individual rights and the power of zoning boards. Springfield Township divided itself into various districts with different requirements of allowable minimum square footage requirements in each zone. It was most certainly set up with an eye towards economics - the idea being that land values already established (and very valuable) could not be adversely affected. This was especially important to the area in which the Medingers had purchased their land, as the surrounding homes tend to be at least three full-story estates built in a variety of Revival Styles mentioned earlier.

In applying for a building permit, the Medingers had to present their plans to the Springfield Township Board of Zoning. On the basis that their house simply was not large enough, they were denied a permit to build! The minimum square footage for this particular area was 1800, while the Medinger's house called for only 1125 square feet. They appealed their case to the Board of Adjustment, which dismissed the petition.

The Medingers then appealed, as allowed by Zoning Law, their case to the Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas where it was heard in February, 1952. This Court held the Zoning Ordinance unconstitutional and directed that a building permit be issued.

Ofcourse, Springfield Township could have stopped there. **But**, a couple of residents in the area, not adjacent property owners, objected, pressuring the Township to appeal to the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court. It is interesting to note

here that a good amount of opposition was mounting in the Townships favor. Several briefs were filed by other townships in support of Springfield's Zoning Law because, if ruled in the Medingers favor, would ultimately affect all of them as well.

The case was presented to Court on January 6, 1954. The Township based their argument on the fact that they had followed the procedures as allowed by the enabling Act of 1931, in establishing a scale of minimum habitable square footage, and that the Zoning Law "protected the public health, safety, morals, and general welfare of the society."

On March 24, 1954, the Court held the scale as invalid, because it did not give a reference to any number of persons who would occupy the building and it would have to do so to justify that it protects on the grounds of public health, safety, etc. In the ruling, the Judge writes, "The natural or zealous desire of many zoning boards to protect, improve and develop their community, to plan a city or a township or a community that is both practical and beautiful, and to conserve the property values as well as the "tone" of that community is commendable. But they must remember that property owners have certain rights which are ordained, protected and preserved in our Constitution and which neither zeal nor worthwhile objectives can impinge upon or abolish." He further states, "We therefore hold that neither aesthetic reasons nor the conservation of property values or the stabilization of economic values in a township are, singly or combined, sufficient to promote the health, or the morals or the safety or the general welfare of the township or its inhabitants or property owners, within the meaning of the enabling Act of 1931, as amended, or under the Constitution of Pennsylvania...."

It is interesting to note that he also says of the Springfield Township Zoning Law, "This ordinance flies in the face of our birthright of Liberty and our American Way of Life, and is interdicted by the Constitution." He then proceeded to order the Township to pay all costs!

All in all the process just to begin building took almost 4 years, now the dream was about to become a reality.

The design of the house is not only drawn from historical sources in correct scale and proportion, but also in construction methods. The walls are built entirely of uncut fieldstone found in surrounding farmland areas. The exterior walls become the interior walls through their being 20" in width, as are the partition walls. To remain true to the colonial tradition of building additions, one exterior wall exhibits wood slats extending from the adjoining wall to the roof as a visual indicator that this part of the structure was an addition to the main one. Again, in colonial farmhouse tradition, this "first" structure's exterior wall also holds a stone with the Medingers initials and the year the house was built.

All the ceilings exhibit the open cross beam construction; most found by Mr. Gable in barns near Harrisburg. There are 4 separate cross beams in the house, smaller beams cross above the immense center beams in support of the ceiling which becomes the floor of the second story. All wood is either joined by pegs or by tongue and groove method, very few nails are used. This is clearly evident on the exterior wood framing the windows - all the corners show that the wood is joined by pegs.

The wood flooring varies in widths from 8" to 12", while all the interior doors adjoining each room exhibit another German Colonial touch. They cut the wood just as the tree grew, wider at the bottom and narrower at the top; so instead of cutting it to a uniform width, they simply joined the wide end to the narrower end, by tongue and groove, piece by piece, until they had created the desired width.

The interior walls have been plastered and painted, with Russell in charge of showing the workmen the right way to plaster as it was important that the wall retain the character of the gentle modulations inherent in the fieldstone. 3" chair rails are set into the walls, as was typical of the era.

The windows feature the antique hand-blown glass they collected, and they are all the original size as well. The deep window casings are built of pine, housing the 20c gas-fired radiators, and cleverly vented. The wood vents are meticulously built with tiny vertical slats encased in wood making them completely blend in character to the window sills.

In the 20c, we are used to window casings that are have square corners; these casings are built in harmony with the curve of the opening established by the fieldstone. While the plastered walls create the vertical casings of the windows, pine is used at both the top and for the bottom sill. The wood is cut to accommodate the gentle, round curve, ultimately extending out into the wall creating the visual sense that the windows are large and spacious.

To lock the sash windows, they had iron pegs made to slip horizontally into the wood, by locating a man in New York who could replicate the quality of the 18c hardware. He also was commissioned to supplement their collection by making additional iron straps for the kitchen, as well as the lamppost on the main entrance.

One of the two windows in the dining room is not sashed, but is a unique bow window. The contractor bowed the wood when it was wet, done in the same manner as a ship's keel was made in the 18c. Ironically, all the glass panes are set in completely straight!

The wood, milled in Boyertown, was often original pieces of lumber from 18c houses. The mantelpiece over the walk-in fireplace was originally a 12" oak beam taken from a house in Reading, PA. Another original design is the stairwell, copied exactly from a 17c farmhouse the Medingers found in Bucks County. Due to the small space involved, the trip to the 2nd floor involves a 90 degree turn, then a fairly steep ascent. The pine steps leading to the actual stairway are angled, emanating in a fan shape from the base of the stairs, their

widths and angles changing in relationship to the walls and the next step until the stairs are finally met. The design is faithful to the original down to the type of wood used - pine for the steps, walnut for the handrail, ornamented with one single groove running the length of the base.

The iron fireback with a rooster pattern in the master bedroom's fireplace is also 18c, dated 1761. Another rooster, which has become the motif of the house, is on a weathervane that Betty and Russell found in 1937 while on their honeymoon on Cape Cod. It rests atop a belltower, built by Mr. Gable, and housing a bell they rescued from a one-room school house in Berks County that was being demolished.

The house sits at the top of a gently sloping grade, giving not only the impression of height, but the house also has a very strong sense of being nestled as well. The now huge, original English boxwood are clustered in groups around the rough fieldstone walls creating a contrast of texture and color that constantly changes in tone as the lighting changes.

The perimeter of the land is fenced in a simple post-rail and the landscape itself is gently rolling and modulating just as an old hillside farmhouse would be. The plantings, all indigenous to early Pennsylvania, are clustered or randomly placed to further Romanticize the environment. Every aspect of it is natural and simple, but certainly not simplistic. A standard design concept is that the most powerful design is created through simplicity, and the Medingers have accomplished this.

Russell personally supervised the sculpting of the grounds. As Betty described it with an amused chuckle, for three entire work days he had the driver of the bulldozer moving soil here, adjusting over there, adding to and taking away until he had achieved just the right look and feel of an old, worn, gentle hillside. The painstaking work and exquisite result is evident

by the fact that it can not be seen - it is a completely natural landscape, there are woods and open space, a brook now gone (or was it ever really there??). A Springhouse is nestled into another small hill below tall, grand hemlocks and clusters of boxwood, marking where the brook once began. The Romantics would have loved this landscape - nothing appears planned, surprises abound everywhere one turns.

The "main" two-story structure appears to soar by its placement in the landscape, but also due to the steeply pitched roofs, a decidedly Gothic influence. The roof tiles add significantly to this sense of verticality and soaring by their placement in vertical rather than staggered courses.

The rough, uncut fieldstone walls in marbled colors of the earth, ranging from burnt sienna to ivory, solidify the structure, firmly establishing it to the ground, while concurrently these same characteristics create the sense of an extension of the earth. Stability and timelessness pervade it - all very appropriate for the significance of an old hillside farmhouse.

The fieldstone also indicates a Medieval quality, a knowledge of which the Pennsylvania Deutsch would have brought with them. Often the term Medieval creates a connotation of cold and austere; however, in this situation, the use of other materials easily allays this. The toasty warm, burnt orange color of the Terra Cotta roof tiles en masse, as well as the dark, rich color of the wood framing the sash windows and doors, and encircling the frames themselves on the exterior walls, serve to temper the cool, rough quality inherent in fieldstone.

The small scale, the limited use of building materials, the strong, clean lines of the structure are brought into complete harmony by the use of a limited palette of warm, analagous colors. The unity of the whole by the separate parts creates a powerful sense of simple graciousness and warmth that was the Medingers dream to fulfill.