

When A House Becomes A Home

by Lynne Belluscio

I just got back from the European Open Air Museum Conference in Germany. The topic was: "The house as an exhibit and its role in research and educational work." The sessions – which were usually in German – discussed the need for research not only in the architectural aspect of the house but also the genealogical history of the house. We ultimately agreed that to make the historic house museum relevant to our visitors, we had to share the stories that made our buildings homes.

Many outdoor air museums in Europe are filled with buildings that were collected and moved to the museum because they were old and architecturally significant. The research was done on the buildings. It has only been recently that there was interest to research the people who lived in those houses. The idea of a "living history" museum seems to attract visitors. But not all living history museums include architecturally intact buildings. Sometimes they will build a replica of a building – such as the Morganville Pottery building or the brewery at Genesee Country Museum.

LeRoy House became a museum because it was the home to the LeRoy family. When Allen Olmsted bought the property in 1911, he believed that it was important to preserve the heritage of this community but at that time there was no historical society. So, for several years, he had an arrangement with the LeRoy Board of Education to allow the principal to live in LeRoy House with the provision that as soon as possible it would become a museum. That happened in 1941.

Most of the research has dealt with the people who lived in the house, but there are many questions that remain about the people and even more about the house itself. At some point, the Historical Society will be able to hire an architectural historian to do further research on the house. That will include taking samples of the wood beams and sending them to Ithaca for analysis to date them.

I hope to have some paint samples taken for analysis. Maybe

we'll be able to find the oldest part of the house and the location of the land office. I hope to discover why there is a hidden staircase above the vault. And maybe we'll dig out the old staircase that leads beneath the front porch that was used by the servants. There are so many mysteries in LeRoy House that need to be answered!!

Unlike LeRoy House which only dates to the early 1800s, some of the houses that I visited in Germany, date to the Middle Ages. The farmhouse from Hofstetten was built in 1367. The Schwedenhaus from Almshof was built in 1554. It boggles the mind to think of researching houses that old!

Before I left for Germany, I knew that my father had visited his ancestral home in southern Germany, near the border with Switzerland. In fact, my daughter and my brother had met the "German relatives." It seems that I spend a lot of time with other people's genealogy but have done very little with my own.

So now that I've returned home, I've pulled out my dad's files and taken a look at the photograph of the old German house. It looks just like the museum houses that I visited last week. The barn and the house are all under the same thatched roof. When my daughter visited my dad's cousin, they were still living in the house, with a few cows in the barn. Since that time, the older generation has passed away, and I don't know what's happened to the house. It was said that it had become part of a museum, but so far I haven't been able to learn much. With the help of the internet and some new contacts at German museums, I hope to find out more. Maybe I'll have the chance to return to Germany and visit my ancestral home.

This fall, the LeRoy House will



offer some special candlelight tours. (Tickets will be available in a couple of weeks.) It will be a very unusual evening with costumed interpreters telling the stories of the house. Right now I am reading through the files and the stories and doing a lot of research. I hope to compile a list of the people who lived in the house. I've identified many people who were born in the house and I know of at least two girls who died in LeRoy House.

Sixty years ago a similar program was offered at LeRoy House and the presentation was begun with a poem by Longfellow:
*All houses wherein men have lived and died
 Are haunted houses. Through the open doors
 The harmless phantoms on their*

*errands glide,
 With feet that make no sound upon the floors.
 We meet them at the door-way, on the stair,
 Along the passages they come and go,
 Impalpable impressions on the air;
 A sense of something moving to and fro.
 There are more guests at table than the hosts invited;
 The illuminated hall is thronged with quiet, inoffensive ghosts,
 As silent as the pictures on the wall.
 The stranger at my fireside cannot see
 The forms I see, nor hear the sounds I hear;
 He but perceives what is; while unto me
 All that has been is visible and clear*

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