

Crown jewels of Ravenna's rich residential past

Early 20th Century homes enduring reminder of bygone era

By JACK SCHAFER AND
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When representatives from Medina's Main Street program recently came to Ravenna one of their first comments after touring our city was, "Oh, how we wish Medina had the stock of historic homes that Ravenna has." A quick tour of city streets in the center of town makes it clear why they were so impressed.

Although many citizens of Ravenna are aware of the fine Greek Revival and late 19th Century houses in the city, they are often unaware that, in terms of both quality and quantity, it is the collection of early 20th Century homes that constitute the crown jewel of Ravenna's rich residential heritage.

At the turn of the century Ravenna was an industrial boom town with new factories opening up and expanding all across the city. Iron, steel, heavy machinery, rubber, electrical goods and furniture all fueled the growth and expansion of the city. The salaries earned by hundreds of local workmen allowed them to own modest single-family houses of their own. This access to the American Dream by so many working class families was one of the greatest achievements of the American economy of the era.

In addition, because these factories were mostly locally owned, there was an army of owners, directors, managers and foremen making handsome salaries and spending a good deal of their money in the city. Ravenna's industrial prosperity allowed them, as well as the bankers, lawyers and doctors who provided services for them and for the city, coun-

ty and private institutions, to erect substantial residences for themselves. The built legacy of this personal wealth from the turn of the 20th Century is visible to this day on our city streets.

Many of these homes were custom designed and built. Most were put up by local contractors, notably the P.L. Frank Construction Co., the area's preeminent builder. These companies used local craftsmen to erect the stately frame, brick and stone exteriors with their pitched and gambrel roofs, bay windows and porches and to fashion beautiful interiors featuring high quality natural wood floors, doors and built-in cabinetry.

Executive housing

Despite a few losses over the years, Ravenna still boasts an impressive collection of these houses from all levels of the managerial class, particularly along the streets east of the business district. East Main Street has large mansions built for the upper crust of the city in the latest residential styles of that era. However, even more striking is the extent of the slightly less pretentious but still impressive houses for middle managers on East Riddle Avenue, East Highland Avenue and North and South Freedom Street. Even secondary streets such as Lawrence Street and Walnut are lined with large, well-built, well-designed houses.

A view from about 1930 in the first block of Freedom Street north of Main shows a line of these substantial "managerial" houses. Set along either side of the brick paved street, behind expansive tree lawns, front yards and founda-



This view of the first block of North Freedom Street, north of Main Street, dates to 1930 but remains remarkably unchanged. The stone home with the full front colonnade was the residence of W.J. Dodge, a prominent insurance man. Willard Crowl, freight agent for the Pennsylvania Railroad, lived in the home to the left. On its right was the home of Levi Frank, vice president of P.L. Frank Construction Co. James A. Jones, president of Jones Brothers Structural Steel Co. and a state legislator, lived in the home at the far right.

tion plantings, these houses sit solidly and proudly on their sites. Furthest to the left is the house of W. J. Dodge, a prominent Ravenna insurance man. While not a particularly large house, with its stone walls, white porch columns and rustic gambrel roof paying homage to America's colonial past, it is one of the most distinctive and elegantly simple houses in the city. Beyond are two substantial "four square" houses (so named for their shape and the four large rooms that usually occupied the four corners). The one to the left is the house of Willard Crowl, freight agent for the Pennsylvania Railroad. On its right is the home of Levi Frank, brother of P.L. Frank and a vice president of P.L. Frank Construction. On the far right of the picture is the home of James A. Jones, president of the Jones Brothers Structural Steel Co. whose plant was at the foot of Walnut Street.

A precious resource

Fortunately, all of these houses still stand and in substantially original condition today. Alas, the brick street has been paved over on this block, but a glimpse at the remaining brick pavement on the block of Freedom south of Main Street gives a good



Secondary streets such as Lawrence Street, above, include large, well-designed homes dating to the early 20th Century that were built for other levels of Ravenna's managerial class.

idea of the kind of richness of color and texture a brick street created and perhaps might bring again to some of Ravenna's premier residential streets if Ravenna follows a nationwide movement to remove the asphalt on top of brick streets that have been paved over. These houses demonstrate the kind of interesting variety that could be achieved in houses of similar scale and materials with similar setbacks on all sides. Compared to the so-called "McMansions" of today that often try to trumpet their individuality, they remain a model of urban civility, and their solid construction has allowed

them to serve their multiple families well for generations.

These splendid houses and district represent a precious resource for the city of Ravenna, one that could not be duplicated today except at exorbitant cost. Ravenna's historic fabric is one of its greatest assets we can all be proud of. It should be recognized and celebrated as an economic tool to attract business and residents to our historic city.

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