



Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society - Research Article  
A Tall Yellow Treasure

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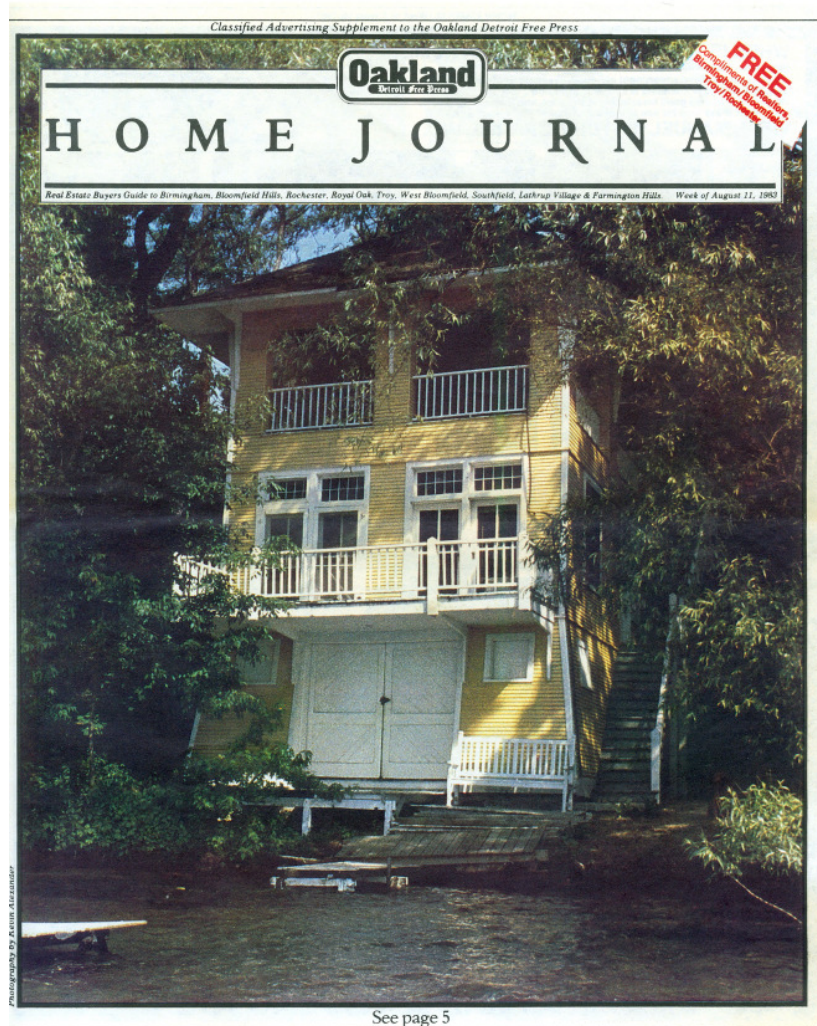
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Casting a sidelong glance toward Orchard Lake while traveling along Pontiac Trail, motorists may catch a quick glimpse of a tall, yellow treasure that stands buried among a multitude of towering trees. It does not, however, contain the traditional ingredients of a treasure; there are no golden coins or precious jewels. One need not even bring a shovel to uncover its riches. It is a three-story boathouse with an offering of wealth that has been discovered and rediscovered throughout the eighty plus years it has overlooked the southern shore of Orchard Lake. The wealth of this unusual treasure lies both in its preserved architectural beauty and its historical importance.

The building was erected in the early 1900s by Willis C. Ward, the grandfather of its current owner, Virginia Ward. Ward bequeathed the boathouse to his granddaughter in his will when he died in 1944. His father, David Lee Ward, and his son, Harold Lee Ward, were both prominent businessmen in the Orchard Lake area, as was Ward himself.

Willis Ward, who spent much of his time on Orchard Lake, commuted from home to office by boat. The two locations were on opposite shores of the lake. Ward was also an avid sailor. Consequently, he was in need of a place to keep his boats, and he decided to construct the storage space himself. What Ward built, however, was much more than a simple shelter for his boats. He



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created a wooden boathouse with a majestic charm that has been preserved and enjoyed to this day.

The first level of the building is a large, one-room area where boats are kept. Creme-colored barn doors, comprising the bottom third of the lakeside portion of the house, open directly on the lake. A gently sloping white dock extends out into the water for several yards, seeming to be a continuation of the floor of the storage area. The space still includes the original pulley and track equipment used by Willis Ward. The area is large enough to accommodate two or three small boats, and in its earlier days, it was often occupied by Ward's and his friends' sailboats. At one time, Ward also kept an antique mahogany electric launch in the boathouse. It now houses an electric canoe that belongs to Virginia Ward and her son Todd, but because the canoe is not in working order, the doors of the storage area are locked for the present.

An outdoor stairway attached to the west side of the building leads to the second floor. A small white door opens into a spacious, one-room area with a high ceiling. Unique style and beauty pervades the room, as it appears in the same glance to be a quaint cottage and a dignified mansion, a triumphant combination of old and new décor. Newly sanded and varnished last year, the walls, floor and ceiling are constructed of wide boards of deep brown mahogany wood that lend the room its stately appearance. Wicker furniture and a peppering of oriental paper lanterns on the ceiling provide a homey, comfortable touch.

Several antique pieces, such as a large dining room table placed in the center of the room, give the second level a Victorian flavor. The boathouse yesteryear is preserved in faded black and white portraits and pictures that decorate the walls and bureau-tops.

On the east side of the house, there are three sets of double windows covered with venetian blinds. Two set of double doors, also sporting full-length shades, lead to the porches that extend from the front and back of the boathouse. Wicker chairs and tables on both porches create a cot tag atmosphere.

Climbing the outdoor stairway one more flight, the third level of the building comes into view. This top floor is a wide open deck, enclosed only by a four-sided wooden railing and a tiled roof that crowns the entire structure. Ladders leading to and screening the upper level have worn out with the years, but it still maintains much of its original character.

"You get a fantastic view of the sunset on the deck," notes 19-year-old Todd. "On July 4, we got a spectacular view of the colors of the sun on the lake combined with the bursting colors of the fireworks."

It not only provides an ideal observation deck, but it is also a unique place to hold a summer party. "The place just comes alive," said Virginia. Mrs. Ward has held one large party at the boathouse, and has also loaned it to friends for the same purpose.

The third level is perfect for moonlight music and dancing. For her party, Mrs. Ward decorated the deck ceiling with colorful Japanese lanterns.

"It was lovely. I used the middle deck for hors d'oeuvres and socializing," she said, with a reminiscent smile on her lips. "It could hold 200 in a squeeze," laughs Todd, who held a large party at the boathouse for his friends last summer.

"It's a good place to just sort of camp-out for the week-end," Mrs. Ward commented, a petite, 64-year-old woman. Every summer, she spends her days at the boathouse, as she resides nearby in Pontiac. Even before 1971, when she was married and living in Colorado, she and her husband would return to Orchard Lake to enjoy the boathouse during the summer months.

"The sand declines very gradually on our lake shore, so it's ideal for swimming," said Mrs. Ward, who often goes to the boathouse just for a relaxing swim.

Such peace and quiet has not always characterized this haven. Until Mrs. Ward's father, Harold Ward, and his father and sister donated land for the Orchard Lake Country Club in 1926, the club's sailors used the boathouse as a starting point for their sailboat races.

Recalling childhood memories of the boathouse, Mrs. Ward comments, "For a long while after the club started, we hardly used the boathouse." But the sailors have begun to return. Last summer, they hosted a pot-luck picnic dinner for them, and plan to make the event an annual affair.

"It was really quite a success," said Mrs. Ward. "They'd all heard about the boathouse because of its connection with their 'predecessors'."

The tall, yellow boathouse has indeed carved a place for itself in Orchard Lake history. Speaking for the Ward family, Mrs. Ward says, "I think we all have good associations with it. It has sort of its own character." Her father, Harold Ward, had a special attachment to the boathouse and its surrounding that left him longing to return to Orchard Lake for the past several years. He had, however, been unable to travel since late 1979, and he never had the opportunity to see the boathouse before his June 26 death.

"He thought about it all the time," commented Mrs. Ward, who spoke with her father on the phone regularly.

With a distant look in her eyes, she added, "On my father's last visit a few years ago, the first thing he said when he arrived at the boathouse was, 'oh, it smells just the same'."

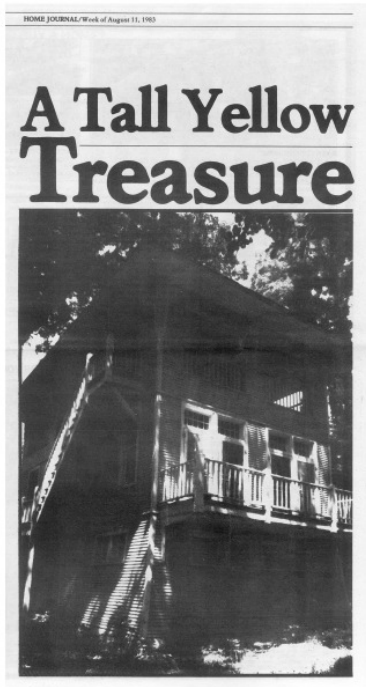
As though it were a trait that could be biologically perpetuated, Todd, Ward's grandson, expresses a similar love of and respect for the boathouse.

"I grew up with it," he says. His many memories keep him coming back to the boathouse, and he enjoys spending time there with his friends. He is often out at the lake during the summer, because he is a sailing instructor for the Orchard Lake Country Club.

Sometime in the years to come, he would like to make the property into a home. It would need a plumbing system, for instance, but the task of converting the boathouse into a permanent residence intrigues the younger Todd. His aspirations seem to guarantee the future of the boathouse. It will continue to stand as a monument to a unique architecture, and it will rightfully remain in the possession of Ward descendants.

Todd vows they'll never accept any of the numerous offers they have continuously received for the property. "It's not for sale," he says, "it belongs in the family and he intends to keep it there. □

by Marjorie Roberts



HOME JOURNAL/Week of August 11, 1983

# A Tall Yellow Treasure

**C**overing a building gone awry on Orchard Lake while traveling along Penna. Todd, sometimes may catch a quick glimpse of a tall, yellow structure that stands heretofore among a multitude of rowing boats. It does not, however, contain the architectural splendor of a structure there are no gables or ornate porches. It is a three-story boathouse with an exterior of weathered Douglas fir, the right place more has been the result of this unusual treasure built in a forgotten and forgotten place and its historical importance. The building was erected in the early 1930s by W. C. Ward, the grandfather of its current owner, Virginia Ward. Ward began the boathouse in his father's name, David Lee Ward, and his son, Harold Lee Ward, who had purchased a house on Orchard Lake area, as was Ward himself.

W. C. Ward, who spent much of his time on Orchard Lake, was known for his love of the lake. Ward was the son of an attorney. Consequently, he was in need of a place to keep his boats, and he decided to construct the boathouse on the lake. When Ward built, however, was much more than a simple shelter for his boats. He created a wooden boathouse with a complex design that has been preserved and enjoyed to this day.

The first level of the building is a large, one-room area where boats are kept. Connected to this deck is a walkway that leads to the lake-side portion of the boathouse, open to the air. A glass-enclosed walk deck extends into the water for several yards, leading to the continuation of the face of the boathouse area. The space will include the original pulley and crank equipment used by W. C. Ward. The area is large enough to accommodate several small boats, and in the earlier days, it was often occupied by Ward's and his friends' sailboats. At one time, Ward also kept large antique mahogany rowing launch in the boathouse. In new houses an electric canoe that belongs to Virginia Ward had her son Todd, but because the canoe is not in working order, the doors of the storage area are locked for the present.

An outdoor stairway attached to the west side of the building leads to the second floor. A small white door opens into a spacious, one-room area with a high ceiling. Unique style and beauty pervade the room, as it appears in the same place to be a quiet cottage and a dignified mansion, a transparent construction of old and new design. The walls are made of natural pine, the walls, floor and ceiling are constructed of wide boards of aged, brown mahogany wood that lend the room to a study appearance. W. C. Ward's and a program of natural paper lanterns on the ceiling provide a history, comfortable touch.

Several antique pieces, such as a large dining room table placed in the center of the room, give the second level a Victorian flavor. The boathouse interior is preserved in faded black and white portraits and pictures that decorate the walls and furniture.

On the east side of the house, there are three sets of double windows covered with exterior blinds. Two sets of double doors, one opening full-length shades, lead to the porch that runs along the front and back of the boathouse. Wicker chairs and tables on both sides create a vintage atmosphere.

Changing the outdoor stairway one more flight, the third level of the building comes into view. This tiny floor is a wide open deck, enclosed only by a four-sided wooden railing and a solid roof that covers the entire structure. Ladders leading to and ascending the upper level have worn out with the years, but it still maintains much of its original character.

"We got a fantastic view of the sunset on the deck," says 15-year-old Todd. "On July 4, we got a spectacular view of the colors of the sun on the lake combined with the boating colors of the fireworks."

It is not only provides an ideal observation deck, but it is also a unique place to hold a summer party. "The place just opens up," says Virginia Ward. "We had the last large party at the boathouse, and has also hosted a lot of friends for the same purpose."

The third level is perfect for midnight music and dancing. For her party, Mrs. Ward decorated the deck with colorful Japanese lanterns.

"We loved it! Loved the middle deck for hours of hours and smiling," she said, with a nostalgic smile on her face. "It could hold a party," laughs Todd, who held a large party at the boathouse for his friends last summer.

"It's a good place to put one of your own for the work," says Mrs. Ward commented, a price, 60-year-old woman. Every summer, she spends her days at the boathouse, as the reader



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