

A treasure hunt every night

1975 article

on Holly Avenue

EVER SINCE the Daniel Wagers moved into their 16-room Cass Gilbert-designed mansion at 412 Holly Ave., life has been a daily treasure hunt and "old home reunion."

Odds and ends and some valuables keep surfacing and so do former residents.

Dan, his wife and the two little Wagers, John, 2½, and Maureen, 6 months, are some of those young people who, defying the statisticians and experts, opted for an old house in an old district of Victorian flavor rather than suburbia.

"In other words," says Dan, a marketing department man for Burlington Northern, "when we moved here from Chicago, where we lived in a similar, but less charming old neighborhood, I bought two acres out in the country. We were going to build."

Then a strange thing happened. One night the Wagers' apartment in one of those "secure apartment complexes with pool" was ripped off and about \$4,000

worth of antiques stolen. (Dan is an antique collector.)

That settled it. The Wagers decided to house hunt in the inner city and right smack dab on lower Holly, almost catty-corner from the Commodore Hotel, they found the old MacLaren mansion.

Such names as Hercules Dousman and Henry M. Rice, famous in Minnesota history, appear on the abstract. But it was Archibald MacLaren who commissioned Cass Gilbert to design the mansion about 1890.

There are Gilberts on the abstract, too, and probably related to Cass, whose architectural style is nowhere more typical than in this home. One finds the same touches in the chapel-church-ballet studio at the foot of Ramsey Hill, and also the Virginia Avenue church at Selby and Virginia.

Well-known family names of Mears, Dean, and Cornwell come and go on the pages of the deed.

In its recent vintage, the daughter of Louis Gilbert owned the house, then Barbara Lohn, who ran it as a nursing home

until the Donald Ranbows bought it in 1973, started to remodel the place and sold it, instead, to the Wagers, who found it two St. Patrick's Days.

Ever since they moved in a year ago March, Dan and his wife have been having more fun finding things, discovering hidden compartments and meeting, not the ghosts of one-time dwellers, but real flesh and blood former dwellers.

"This house has a real fan club going for it," said Dan.

One is Margaret MacLaren, who lives at 438 Portland Ave., a block away. Her grandfather was Archibald and she grew up in the mansion.

The Gilberts drop by, too.

Oliver
Towne



One day last summer, Dan noticed a car driving slowly past. He motioned the driver to stop and it turned out to be no less than St. Paul's most distinguished and renowned former safe cracker and Capone Gang member, Morris (Red) Rudensky.

Just after his reformation and release from Leavenworth Federal Prison, he rented a room at 412 Holly and took his meals at the Commodore Hotel.

"There have been other owners and undoubtedly will be other former residents coming back for auld lang syne," Daniel said.

The Wagers are thinking of inviting one and all back for a big reunion banquet.

They've got the perfect party game, too.

A group search of the old house for undiscovered treasures.

The things Daniel and his wife have dug up include \$25 in old, large-size bills, pried out of a closet by his wife; a silver brooch with stone setting, pulled out of

the basement ash pit; a tarnished coin that fell out of some crumbling bricks in the fireplace; a Saratoga trunk full of letters and publications Louis Gilbert wrote and collected in France during World War I when he served with the YMCA field service; an entire collection of signed Steuben glass light fixtures (now cleaned and being used), and myriad other antiquities like pot-bellied coal stoves, gas light fixtures, wrought iron bed frames and Wedgwood bone china.

(Even guests share in this wealth. I came away with original issues of the Paris edition of the New York Herald for the day before and after the signing of the Armistice in World War I and a Stars and Stripes for Aug. 16, 1918, listing such late literati as Alexander Woolcott and Grantland Rice as editorial management.)

"Name me one new suburban ramblar, townhouse or condominium where you can come home at night and go hunting for valuables and historic memorabilia," Daniel said.