

243 West Main

Researched and written by Ruth Ann Montgomery

Steve and Carol Culbertson's home at 243 West Main was built in 1881. The architectural style of the house is Victorian Vernacular. The name is used to designate houses and commercial buildings built during the time period of Queen Victoria's reign in England.

The buildings defined as vernacular are usually designed from pattern books that were readily available to builders. The style does not have strong identifying characteristics but incorporates various elements from the popular styles of the time, Italianate, Stick, Queen Anne, Gothic, or Second Empire.



Today the property is described on tax records as the east 57.75 feet of lot 5 and the west 8.25 feet of lot 6, Block 6 of the Original Plat of Evansville. For many years, the lot was vacant and sold as part of a larger parcel of land.

Then in January 1881, Almeron Eager purchased this lot from Alex Wilson's large parcel and the Evansville Review reporter wrote. "Mr. Eager has bought the vacant lot next east of Albert Snashall, of Alex Wilson and intends putting a tenement house thereon in the Spring.

However, Eager had an opportunity to sell the vacant lot at a small profit. Eager had purchased the lot for \$212.50 and sold it to Edward Sargent in April 1881 for \$275. In the spring of 1881, Sargent began excavating for the foundation of his new home. In 1882, he borrowed \$1,000 from Lansing Mygatt to perhaps make an addition or complete the payment for work on the house.

Sargent was a tinner and worked for the hardware firm of F. A. Baker & Co. The store was located in the Magee block on East Main Street. Their advertisements were typical of hardware stores of the time. In addition to hardware, they carried tinware, shelfware, stoves, agricultural implements and cutlery. Baker advertised that he had a tin shop at the store and would do tin work at the lowest prices. The shop also had cheese and butter factory machinery.

Sargent was often sick. He suffered from rheumatism and his symptoms were often so severe that he could not work. In December 1888, the Evansville Tribune reported that Sargent had been unable to work for several days. "The disease has become chronic with him and he has suffered more or less from it for several years, but it is hoped by his many friends that he will soon recover."

Sargent soon opened his own business and since Evansville already had several hardware stores, he sold his house to Lansing Mygatt in December 1891 for \$1,750. Sargent then moved to Garner, Iowa and opened a hardware store. He often returned to Evansville to visit family and friends.

One of his last visits was in December 1892 when the Review reported: "Mr. Ed. Sargent, who is in the hardware business at Garner, Iowa, spends Christmas at home. Everybody's glad to see Ed. and shake a warm hand with him." Sargent died in 1893 and his body was returned to Evansville and buried in Maple Hill cemetery.

Mygatt had no intention of living in the house, when he purchased it from Ed Sargent. Mygatt was a hardware merchant in business as Snashall & Mygatt and was a real estate investor. He owned several rental properties and lived in a house at the northwest corner of West Main and Second Street.

Mygatt used the house at 243 West Main as a rental property and after his death in 1894, his wife, Cecelia, inherited the property. Cecelia Mygatt held onto the property for six years after her husband's death. She sold it to Fred L. Franklin in 1900 for \$1,750.

From 1900 to 1944, the house was owned by a member of the Franklin family. Fred Franklin was the manager of the Grange Store egg and butter department.

Fred was unlucky in love. Twice he was a widower. A few years before he purchased the house at 243 West Main, Fred married Mary Davenport and on Valentines Day in 1892, she died, just a few hours after the death of their first child.

Three years later, in July 1895, the young widower, Fred Franklin, married Annie M. Stauffacher. Fred and Annie were living in the house on West Main Street in 1900, according to an Evansville city directory.

Annie died on October 10, 1902. Her obituary was printed in the Evansville Tribune with this tribute: "She leaves many warm friends and a kind indulgent husband. Her mother, one brother and sister were present at the funeral which was held at the Baptist Church."

A few months later, in March 1903, Fred sold the house to his brother, Leon E. Franklin for \$1,900. Fred and another brother, Frank, were about to open a new business, The Franklin Bluing Company. They sold laundry bluing, a product used by housewives for whitening clothes. Fred continued to work at the Grange Store and Frank was the salesman for the new company.

Then in 1906, Fred quit the Grange Store and became a salesman for the bluing business. It was a short lived venture and Fred returned to the Grange Store in the grocery department. Fred married for the third time in 1912 and continued to work at the Grange Store until he was well into his 90s.

Leon Franklin owned the house from 1903 to 1944. Leon was born in Union township in 1868. Census records list Leon's occupation as carpenter.

The house was listed in early city directories as 336 West Main. In 1912, the post office started mail delivery to homes and a new house numbering system was initiated. The house number became 243 West Main.

In the May 7, 1914 issue of the Evansville Review, a slight change to the house was noted: "Leon Franklin is improving his house by the addition of a new porch."

The 1920 census lists Leon and his wife "Missa" living in the house at 243 West Main Street in Evansville. He told the census taker he was a house carpenter.

Leon's first wife, Artemisa Fairbanks Franklin, died in 1926. On Friday, September 24, 1926, Leon advertised an auction at his home, as he was "breaking up housekeeping." The sale was "a full line of household furniture, including stoves, beds, mattresses, dishes, etc. Dan F. Finnane was the auctioneer.

Two years later, he married Jessie Ivis and moved to Darien, and rented the Evansville. James B. Coleman and his wife Bonnie were listed as residents of the Evansville property on Main Street in the 1930 census.

According to deed records, Leon's second wife Jessie Franklin was given joint tenancy of the property in April 1942. His obituary indicates that he became very ill at about this time.

Leon and Jessie Franklin sold the house to George E. and Cora Smith and their son Ray Smith in August 1944. Leon died the following year on May 27.

George and Ray Smith operated a meat market at 17 West Main Street. George Smith and his son, Ray purchased the market in 1920 and named it the City Meat Market. The Smith family advertised "home-killed" pork, beef, veal, and mutton.

Evansville's butchers competed with assembly-line Chicago meat packing plants that shipped pre-cut meat to grocers. Smith's City Meat Market ads told the advantage of buying from a local meat processor. Their meat, according to the ads was fresher than any shipped from a distant city.

For 38 years, the Smith's operated the business at 17 West Main. Customers were urged to try one of "Smitty's" quality steaks with the assurance that "our meats assure you a successful dinner." At Christmas time they offered "home-grown and picked" poultry.

The father and son team worked together for many years. In the 1930s and 40s they operated under the name Geo. Smith & Son. After George Smith died in 1954, Ray continued to operate the meat market.

Ray Smith was also the local bookie, placing horse racing bets for local gamblers. Young boys acted as couriers to carry bets to Smith. The gamblers wrapped the bets in paper, handed them off to the courier to take to Smith's meat market. Smith delivered them to the depot, to catch the train that would deliver the bets to the Chicago area horse racing tracks. In 1958, Ray sold the business and went to work for Chapin's Grocery as a meat cutter.

In 1969, Ray Smith sold the house to Donald and Mary Ann Schroeder. The Schroeders lived in the house, selling it to Ronald & Terri Hyne in June 1976.

A little more than a year later the Hyne's sold the house to Leo Bruenig. Bruenig owned the house from September 1977 to January 1990 when he sold it to Dale R. Mann. After Mann's death, the Culbertson's purchased the property from the Mann estate in 2003.

They began an extensive remodeling project. Bud Peterson, a popular brick and stone renovation artist, taught Steve how to cement the stone walls.

The Culbertsons restored the exterior of the house by painting and putting in long windows in the second floor. They removed a doorway from the front hall into the living room and papered the entry way.

The second floor hallway floor was restored to its original level. Trim that had once decorated the bedroom was discovered under the flooring in the hallway. Someone, perhaps the carpenter, Leon Franklin, had laid the trim across the rafters as spacers to raise the floor. Another unexpected find was a crow bar left behind between the rafters. Using the pattern from the old trim, Steve Culbertson's was able to duplicate the trim and restore the decoration in the two bedrooms and hallway.

On the first floor, Carol and Steve removed the soffit from above the kitchen cupboards and added trim across the top of the cupboards. Carol displays collectibles and some of her rosemary above the cupboards. The Culbertsons also replaced an orange countertop that was part of a previous owner's kitchen remodeling project.

A previous owner lowered the ceiling in the first floor room used as an office. The Culbertson's restored the ceiling to its original height and covered the ceiling with drywall.

The living room and dining room have tall windows, that let in natural light. The woodwork in the two rooms is beautifully restored.

A small bathroom was added to the first floor in 2007. They also remodeled a large bathroom on the second floor. One half of the old upstairs bathroom was made into a walk-in closet. The other half of the room became the bathroom, with a door located closer to the bedrooms.

Each of the bedrooms is decorated with artifacts collected from Carol and Steve's families. Carol frequently gives talks about her Norwegian heritage. Items from Steve's family are displayed in the master bedroom and items from Carol's family are in the guest room.

A summer project of the Culbertson's is a garden railroad with buildings and landscaping. The Culbertson's and their garden railroad were featured in the Wisconsin State Journal Sunday edition a few weeks ago.

The home and gardens have been featured on several Evansville house and garden tours.