

The Gaches Mansion is a huge, polished top of a house that squats smugly atop a hill in LaConner, Washington. It was built in 1891 by George Gaches for his wife, Louisa. They had come to the Pacific Northwest from England, and had settled in a much more modest house on the same site in 1883. By 1891, George's mercantile business was flourishing, and Louisa was getting a little homesick for the Isles, so they decided it was time to build a proper English home.

The granite blocks that form the foundation of the house were quarried locally in the Chuckanut mountains. The full basement is built on the same huge rock on which the entire town of LaConner is built. If you go out of town away, the geological formation is much more apparent than from the house at the top of the hill; you can see that the location of the town was chosen for its elevation and nearness to the water. The mansion is located on a particularly high point that has never been flooded. The basement now is mostly empty, except for some stupendous outcroppings of mold fed by jelly from a host of jelly jars broken by vandals in the early seventies. The broken jars were subsequently removed, but the jelly lives on.

George Gaches was a drygoods merchant, and he had his office in his home. He would go over his books at his desk in the turret, while he watched his competitors doing business in the channel and on the street below. From this vantage point he could easily observe the daily activities of all the inhabitants of the town. The same cannot be said today, for downtown LaConner is now obscured by several two-storey buildings, but one can still see the Rainbow Bridge spanning the Swinomish Channel, the Dunlap logging yards, and the Swinomish Indian Reservation directly across the water.

The couple lived in the house until 1900, when business--or something--took George sixty miles south to Seattle.

They sold the house to Dr. Howe, the local physician, who used it as a hospital until 1910, when he sold it to the Vaughn family. The Vaughns lived there until the mid-thirties, by far the longest of any of the occupants of the home. They also added a back bedroom and bathroom, bringing the total of the rooms in the house to twenty-two.

The house then went through a series of different owners, some of whom were not paying their taxes, so in 1940 the house was sold at a Sheriff's sale. The purchase price was \$1000, and the woman who bought the house, divided it up into apartments and sleeping rooms. It was known as the "Castle Apartments", a somewhat hopeful appellation that lasted through thirty years and several more proprietors, until 1973, when a great fire nearly consumed the house.

It was caused by a careless smoker in the third floor rear bedroom; it raged all one April night. The fire equipment wouldn't reach to the third floor, so the firemen and neighbors fought the fire from the roof next door, but the third floor was completely lost and the second floor extensively damaged by the time the flames were brought under control.

My friend Alison (who personally conducted my recent tour of the Skagit Valley) is of the local Dunlap/Zimmerman family. It turns out that the night the mansion burned, her mother and stepfather were having a housewarming party to celebrate their move from LaConner (population 650)

to the bustling metropolis of Burlington (population 4,000). The entire LaConner volunteer fire department, including Alison's Uncle Boyd, the Fire Chief, was ten miles away at the Zimmerman's party. This seldom-admitted fact contributed greatly to the confusion of the evening and no doubt to the ensuing damage.

Two weeks after the house burned, the owner died--some people say of a broken heart. Others, well, they seem to think it was something closer to a broken bank account.

The house lay in ruins for about a year, until a group of concerned citizens got together, bought the house, and set about the restoration. It took four years, and a lot of what Meg Pederson, the manager of the mansion, calls "sweat equity"--volunteer labor after hours and on weekends. It was finally opened to the public in 1978.

Art Hupy was one of the eight people who founded LaConner Landmarks, Inc. in order to begin the reconstruction of the severely damaged mansion. A LaConner-nee-Seattle photographer, Hupy's only previous experience with this sort of endeavor was the renovation of Arthur Denny's nephew's house on Capitol Hill in the 'fifties. He has since sold the Denny house.

His best recollections of the Gaches center around the time when the newly organized LaConner Landmarks had decided to go ahead and sign a bank loan that would allow them to begin construction and to let the funding fall where or when it would. (They eventually received Federal Historical Preservation matching funds.) The house had been soaked down after the fire, and the water damage was so severe that even the ground floor walls had to be stripped of all plaster and extraneous decoration, and the windows and doorjams had to be taken out of the house and literally dipped in paint stripper in order to remove the baked-on paint and smoke.

"You could stand in the front hall and look all the way through the house." Hupy shakes his head ruefully. "The house had sat for a year after the fire, just sat and molded. All that could be saved were the studs, the bare wood supports. Volunteers removed the plaster and the lathe, and then we had an art show. It was kind of fun. We just put nails in the bare studs, and hung the pictures back to back. You could see through, you know, to the backs of the pictures...we had some pretty good artists donate their work. I'd say we had ten thousand dollars worth of art in here, maybe more, so my wife and I came up. Now, there's no windows in the house, you know; the front door isn't even on because they had taken it off to have it restrained and so forth, and it's November, and the wind is blowing through the place like you wouldn't believe. So my wife and I get our sleeping bags and a foam pad, built a fire in the fireplace--it still worked--and we slept in here all night to guard the art." He chuckles. "And boy, we froze our--we had ourselves a good bottle of wine, and those sleeping bags, but it was still freezing."

He has similar stories about the days when they did just about anything to raise money for the house. Spaghetti feeds, ice cream socials, art auctions, benefits, musical and theatrical events, and fashion shows all contributed to the cause. The mansion has never produced an excess of funds, despite its dedicated supporters, and for the last few years Hupy has rented the second floor of the mansion in his capacity as curator of the Valley Museum of Northwest Art. It seems somehow appropriate that the Valley Museum--one of the few places that continuously exhibits Max Benjamin, Guy Anderson, Kenneth Callahan, Morris Graves, Phillip McCracken, Mark Tobey, George Tsutakawa, James Washington and many more--

should be housed in the Gaches mansion, since these were the "pretty good artists" whose work was donated and sold to fund the restoration.

The house is almost completely restored to its original condition, from the authentic Victorian wallpaper found in an attic somewhere back east to the period pieces of furniture, and reproduction wall coverings and window treatments donated by local families and businesses. The fire damage is now observable only in the texture of the bannisters of the main staircase. Although they were deeply charred, because of their beauty and intrinsic value the bannisters on the first and second floors were nearly completely restored. As one runs a hand along the seemingly flawless wood of the carved railings, one can actually feel the scars from the ordeal in the raised, distressed grain of the wood.

The reconstruction of the third floor was a complicated process, since there were no original floor plans in existence, or, to be more precise, there were many. Ladies Home Journal was publishing floor plans at the time the house was built--including plans by Frank Lloyd Wright and other well-known architects--and the contractor who designed and built the Gaches mansion probably used the Journal or a similar publication to help George and Louisa determine the features that they would like to have included in the final design. This practice led to the preponderance of what Meg calls "cookbook houses", with elements of different styles combined somewhat idiosyncratically, like ingredients in a recipe, to produce homes that are essentially high Victorian, but with any number of influences. (The Gaches is classic Victorian with touches of English Tudor.) The third floor, then, is stark, and simply functional, since the assumption was made that it most probably was used for servant quarters and a play area for the children. It is as yet incompletely furnished, but it is well lit and cheerful, and the view from the turret is one of the most exquisite to be had in western Washington.

The fireplaces are original. The metal work and tiles were imported from England (shipped 'round the Horn in fact), but the mantles are wood, and probably came across the country from places where cherry and oak grew in abundance. The focal points in the house--fireplaces and special pieces of furniture--were proper, imported things, but the floor and the woodwork is cedar, so there is a distinctly Northwest quality about the house. Cedar, Meg says, laying a loving hand on the seemingly unwarpageable 9-foot pocket doors, is a wonderful building material. You can walk around LaConner and see one hundred year old windows working like a charm--although the windows on the south sides of the buildings tend to be a little dry.

The house is painted two shades of tan. A photograph circa 1920 shows the exterior as a uniform white; this was probably the original color. The current color scheme was, as far as I can tell, determined by the local hardware store that donated the paint. The exterior of the house features fish-scale" shingles, bracketed dormers and lots of bay windows...the Tudor touches consist of "half-timbering" on the cupola and above the porch, decorations that give the house a somewhat medieval air.

The other houses in the town are almost exclusively truly Victorian constructions. LaConner boomed right around the turn of the century, when it served as a trans-shipping and trading point for the produce of the Skagit Valley, the area logging industries, and local fishing operations. But when the railroad came through in the early twenties, all the development and the county seat moved east to Mount Vernon, and LaConner went through a long period of arrested development. No longer was there

money to build, much less for such cosmetic niceties as remodelling or exterior paint, even when Latex paint became so popular in the 'fifties, and because people were unable to modernize, the original Victorian architecture and unvarnished woodwork are delightfully intact.

Some modernization is taking place now, particularly in terms of interiors, plumbing, weatherproofing and insulation. People seem to be much more willing to invest in old homes, and remodel them according to their more modern tastes. Out of a small window at the top of the Gaches house, we could see a number of older homes that appeared to be much the same as when they were first built. Some, like the house built by James Gaches, George's brother, had had "modern" touches added a while ago--such subtle touches as pink or green siding, or cedar shakes, which simply scream sixties suburbia--but most sported the same simple, austere facades broken by complicated, intricate trim...a style that so adeptly reflects the Victorian mores.

The rent from the Valley Museum, from weddings and receptions held in the house, and the mansion's one-dollar admission fee help meet the mortgage payments; however there are some major repairs that will have to be undertaken within the next few years, and no one is really sure where the money will come from. The roof has a rather large leak, the porch has some structural damage, and the house is due for a paint job. The cost of these repairs will be enormous. The board of directors of the mansion, comprised of five concerned citizens (most of whom have their signatures on the mortgage papers), meets about once a month, and has recently decided that they have to get together a major fundraising committee to decide how to procure some funds.

Meg Pederson is concerned about the apathy that locals may be beginning to feel about the mansion. "After the initial excitement, it becomes apparent that certain major expenditures will have to be incurred--roof repairs, or paint, or putting a new foundation on a house. Suddenly the first generation has expended all its energy, and more maintenance monies are what are going to insure the monument's continued existence for the next generation."

She strikes the table gently, rhythmically, and leans intently forward.

"The National Register is only a form of recognition. It places no restraints--other than political ones--on the use of a listed landmark. If the government bodies that provide the necessary funding for historical societies can find enough interested private money that would make it worth while to wreck a national monument and use the land more profitably, they can tear it down...or foreclose on the mortgage."

Art Hupy is proud of the house, but he is not terribly concerned about its future. "When we got the place, it was a delapidated old rooming house--cheap rooms!", he laughs. "The best thing that ever happened to it was the fire." He has seen the miracles that can be wrought by a few "movers and shakers," and considering the things that the house has been through, there cannot be too many surprises in store. "If it weren't for the fire it would still be the Castle Apartments," is his philosophy, and presumably future trials-by-fire will only serve to interest more people in a part of the local heritage that, in a town like LaConner, will never be lost, forgotten, or again allowed to decay.

People over to Mount Vernon, which is in Burlington's back yard. or vice versa, don't seem to be terribly concerned about the fate of the Gaches

mansion; in fact, they don't seem to think too much of it at all. Alison's long-time friend, Julie, asked about the reason for our trip, and when I replied, leaned back on her robin's egg blue 1959 Chrysler New Yorker, and sneered, claiming that if I wanted to see a real local landmark, they'd have to take me to the Corner Tav (a.k.a. The West Allen Country Club). Needless to say, we went, fins flying, and arrived there without having decided whether the Corner Tav was in Allen or actually in Bow. At any rate, it certainly did have atmosphere. Peanut shells littered the floor in about a two-to-one mixture with discarded punch-boards and pull-tabs; bowling and horseshoe trophies embellished the walls. (Apparently, the Corner's horseshoe tournaments are rivaled in excitement and local tradition only by the Berry/Dairy Days held in mid-June, and "AWOL Jay" Benston's boxing smokers held in his family's barn every four or five months.) Although the decor was dominated by the meticulously groomed shuffleboard and pool tables, my personal favorite was the centerfold picture of a nude male displayed in the women's rest room. The picture was covered by a heavy flap from the man's waist down, which, when lifted, caused a light to go on and a loud buzzer to go off out in the bar. "Boy, the first time I went in there..." Julie was covering her mouth and rolling her eyes. "I musta held it there two, three minutes from the way the guys out here were rolling." She widened her eyes and shook her head--"How was I to know?"--and smiled.

But if Mount Vernoners and Burlingtonians and denizens of the Corner Tavern take the place for granted, LaConnerites are proud of the Gaches mansion, and flock to its doors regularly...except in May, when people are planting, and April, which is tulip season, or during harvest, or when the weather is exceptionally nice... They talk about the house though, and about the busloads of tourists (like me) that arrive in town nearly every day all summer, promptly at one o'clock. There are a lot of apocryphal stories circulating, especially about the days when the house was young. Rumor has it that it is haunted, that it was once a "sporting house", and even that Louisa never liked the house at all. Many disagree about the order, duration of or motivation for related events, but certain events can be agreed upon.

All agree that George Gaches bought the local drygoods store from John Conner, the founder of the town. George was in partnership with his brother James for about twenty years, until around 1900, when George left town for "business reasons." The "business reason" appears to be that George and James had a huge falling-out. James' side of the family still lives in LaConner, and to this day has told no one why George Gaches left town.

Was it some scandal that drove George from his beloved new house and adopted town...or was it simply that he and James could no longer work and live in such close proximity to one another? Even money is on the latter, for, if one looks at the difference in the architecture of the two brothers' houses, it is clear that the brothers had very different tastes. The mansion is elaborate and commanding, if not ostentatious. James' house is sedate, uninteresting, and even stodgy in comparison, with none of the grand flourishes that characterize his brother's home. This contrast may be more obvious today due to the state of disrepair into which the less luxurious house has fallen, and the fact that it has not been declared a historical landmark, but exists instead as a footnote to a legend.

-Teresa Woods