

A look behind the walls at State. and Plum streets

By **GINNY BAUGHMAN**

For the News & Public Opinion

Although I am not a native of Westerville, I have seen many changes in the 20 years I have lived here. Sidewalks have been added to streets and farmer's fields have become subdivisions, office complexes and parking lots. Businesses in Uptown come and go so quickly that they barely have time to change the signs.

But the corner of State and Plum has remained the same. I have often wondered, "Who lives behind those walls?" I had heard it was a Japanese center or museum, but I had never seen it open. Over the years I watched as the property fell into disrepair while I still wondered, "Who lives behind those walls?"

Last fall, I noticed a For Sale sign on the walls of the property. Soon after, the *News & Public Opinion* published an article that told me what was on the other side of the walls. I was surprised to read the interesting history of the Japanese Tea House and Shrine. I had no idea there was an authentic shrine actually brought from Japan standing on that property and that many school children from all over the state had visited it.

Later in the fall I had an opportunity to visit.

The garden definitely has fallen into disrepair, but yet, it had a wonderfully artistic quality about it. It was a small, yet spacious garden overgrown with bamboo and other interesting plants and trees. A moon bridge led over a small, half empty pond to the hand-built shrine beyond and I felt as if I had walked directly into a Japanese picture book.

As I crossed the bridge, it gave way a little under my feet, making me aware of the many repairs the property needed. Ascending the stairs to the shrine, I saw yellow caution tape pointing out more needed repairs, but as I entered, I quickly forgot about the problems of the structure,

captivated by its strong yet simple interior.

I was immediately aware of the many artistic details. The dragon and Japanese symbols hanging near the ceiling and the Japanese sandals near the door made it feel as if its original occupants were still present somewhere. Yet the rows of neatly lined benches and the stack of original brochures describing the site made me feel as if school children were still there somewhere viewing other buildings. The shrine's basement, about which I had heard so much, was a time capsule that took me back to Japan of the 1960s. Replicas of Japanese shop windows still displayed the wares of 40 years ago and the slot machine lights were still blinking with activity.

I emerged from the time capsule and walked across the garden to the house. I was immediately struck by the artistry of the intricate, breathtaking tile work that spread from one bathroom past the 1950s kitchen to another bathroom in the back of the house. The woodwork, beautiful screens, and bathroom fixtures all made me feel as if I had stepped into another country and time. The entire house was so unique and it was still in excellent condition!

As I finished my tour, I was saddened, knowing that these buildings might not grace the corner much longer. In just one short hour, I had been transported to a different time and culture, a truly exciting experience because I have never visited Asia. I had so many questions.

Since my visit to the property, I've had the opportunity to join a group of enthusiastic residents who want to save the Japanese Tea House and Shrine. I certainly hope that we will be successful in saving this treasure, because I feel that we should we should continue George and Opal Henderson's legacy for a whole new generation of visitors.

Ginny Baughman is a member of the Arts Council of Westerville.

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