

GARDNER MUSEUM PURCHASES SLICE OF AMERICAN SUBURBAN HISTORY

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The Gardner Historical Museum is excited to share its newest acquisition with the community, the museum recently purchased what they call, "The Bray House," which is located directly to the north of their current facility.

After the conclusion of World War II, the "Baby Boom" generation was beginning to sprout, and new housing developments began to spring up, American suburbia was born. The Bray home was built by Cecil Dolisi in 1953, and was part of a new Frank Moore development. Frank Moore was an entrepreneur who produced many homes, subdivisions, and buildings in Gardner from the 1920s to 1960s.

Robert and Doris Bray along with their two children, R. W. and Kay moved from a little house on Park Street to their new home which they had built on Shawnee in the early 50s. The Bray family has owned the home ever since its construction.

During the 1950s and 1960s Robert Bray drove a gasoline truck for Standard Oil Company and delivered gasoline to stations and farms throughout the area. Sometimes Robert would come home with homemade jelly as payment, and Doris would say, "Robert we can't pay our bills with jelly!" Robert would reply to his wife, "Well, I couldn't stand to see those kids freeze." Lisa Berg said her Grandmother Doris would tell this story and say, "He had a big heart, so I let it go, and didn't bother him again about it."

When customers came to pay their gas bill they went to the porch on the east side of the house facing Oak Street and rang the bell because Doris had her desk right inside this particular door. Robert parked his gas truck on a stone drive behind and to the east of the house.

The Bray family constructed a croquet court on the east side of their home with tiny gravel spread for the turf, and the neighborhood children played for many hours on it.

Lisa Berg has very fond memories of her grandparents living in the house. "We played cards and games at the kitchen table, and we would make popcorn on the stove, then we would pour the hot popcorn onto a spread-out sheet of newspaper in the middle of the table."

Berg's grandmother, Doris raised and hatched quail. "She had a cage on top of the piano, and my brother Mark and I would carry them around the house, and grandma would just follow behind us and clean up," Berg said laughing.

During the Cold War Era of the 1950s, the Bray family had a bomb fallout shelter built behind the house. It was filled with rations, a hand operated washing machine, and other necessities. During tornados and bad storms the Fonseca family would come and share the shelter. Lisa Berg has acquired the original plans for the shelter and plans to share copies with the museum.

After Robert and Doris passed away, their son R. W. lived at the residence until his death. The house has been vacant ever since.

When the home came up for sale, the museum was presented with an opportunity to expand. Due to the property's location, it's situated directly to the north of their existing property, it was an ideal place to grow.

The museum approached the matter with great consideration with the board spending many hours discussing, researching, and crunching numbers to determine if they could handle the extra mortgage and if this was the appropriate progressive step to take. The decision was made more difficult by the hard economic times. After much debate, the board determined the opportunity was one they should not pass up.

"The board spent an entire year carefully considering this visionary decision," Shirley Brown-VanArsdale, the President of the Gardner Historical Board said.

Now the process of converting the property into a useful space for the museum and community will begin. Volunteers are needed for painting, woodworking, cleaning, and of course, monetary donations are greatly appreciated. The museum plans to use the Bray House for administration, a gift shop, a board room, and a room dedicated solely to research which will be open to the community to use as they wish. Much of the Bray House is still in its original 1950s décor, and the museum is planning on preserving the era authentically, including the kitchen which includes the original metal cupboards, and red Formica counter tops.

The museum is asking the community to donate or loan to be scanned and copied any old gasoline receipts, artifacts, or pictures from the Bray family and of the property from yester year.

The museum board plans on hosting a Grand Opening of the Bray House during its annual Ice Cream Social in July of 2011.

The Gardner Historical Museum wants the community to step back in time to the 1950s when entering the Bray House, and also travel back in time to the 1800s when entering their original property the Foster Home. The addition will also allow for the Foster Home, built in 1893, to be used by the community for tea parties, showers, weddings, and meetings.

"This is our gift to the community," Brown-VanArsdale said.

Berg said she's pleased the museum is restoring the property to its original design.

"Kids now will be able to see what it was like in the 50s and 60s," Berg said.

To compensate for the amount of time needed to accomplish moving administration, the museum will be open for scheduled private tours from Dec. 1, through Jan. 15. Call to 856-4447 or visit the museum online at www.GardnerHistoryMuseum.org for more information.