

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT SMYRNA

By

Carol Child

There's something about Smyrna. Nearly everyone who comes to Smyrna, Del., the first time tells of being pleasantly surprised by the warm and charming character of the historic downtown, of the friendly citizens and shopkeepers and the gracious residents who open their historic homes each year for the Candlelight Walking Tour.



Indeed, Smyrna is a welcoming place. Even the ghosts are friendly. They'll appear later in this story.

Before deciding to buy our historic home in Smyrna, we drove down from Wilmington to see it a second time. We got to Smyrna's historic district and then couldn't find the house. We pulled up to ask directions of a guy raking his lawn. He smiled, leaned on his rake, and casually spent ten minutes describing the layout of the town and providing a choice of routes to get to the house. The house was just around the corner and a couple blocks over, it turns out.

I was drawn to the town by the historic charm of the red bricks, brackets, gargoyles and lace of the Colonials, Federals, and Queen Annes. I like to walk the historic brick sidewalks in the shade of grand old maples and walnuts, smell the aroma of a boxwood garden behind a wrought iron fence or of well-seasoned wood when I pass a historic barn; I like to see vegetables growing on a plot of land or gay flowers frolicking along a wrap-around porch.

Where else of a summer evening can you see a promenade of young parents wheeling kids in strollers on their way for ice cream at the historic Four Corners? Where else can you live when of a summer evening at dinnertime a band parades right past your house playing John Philip Sousa marches, a troop of Pied Pipers drawing families onto their porches and sidewalks and followed by a host of helmeted kids on bikes? The first time I heard them coming up the street I leaped from the dinner table and raced out onto the porch. I was nine again. That's the Citizen's Hose Company Marching Band, winners of the Governor's cup year after year, practicing.

These are a few of my favorite things about Smyrna.

There are plenty of family activities year round in historic Smyrna. My best experience was at Christmas when snow flakes laced the night sky, carolers kindled hearts with song, Santa rode up the street in the back of a pickup, and the sky wore whiskers of wood smoke curling from old chimney pots above the tall rooftops. It was the first year I went on the Holiday Candlelight Walking Tour of historic homes where I settled into a warm 18th-century kitchen, engaged in camaraderie while sampling savory five-bean soup simmered in a kettle over a fire in a brick fireplace nearly big enough for a convening of the Continental Congress. Ron Sayers, owner of Sayers Jewelers and Gemologists in Smyrna, whose home it was at the time, said, "They came back every year just for the bean soup."

Smyrna's downtown historic district is a great place to stroll and shop at any season, but at Christmas time I've come to look forward to the Holiday Candlelight Walking Tour* of Historic Smyrna, sponsored by the Smyrna Main Street Association. As I

walk from home to home on the tour, discovering historic Smyrna by candlelight, I am carried back in time imagining the clip-clop of hooves and the jangle of harnesses, horses drawing carriages bearing folks through the brisk dusk to parties or to the Opera House. You know, a hundred years ago the citizens ran horse races right through the center of town. Ah, but I digress. As I pass shops I can almost hear the rustle of petticoats beneath long skirts as women bustle from shops to home wielding presents and making Christmas preparations, baking cookies at the wood stove with their children gathered round.

This year the tour will take place on Sunday, December 11 from 1:30 to 6:30 p.m., if you think you'd like to come, when residents graciously open their homes, ranging from pre-Revolutionary through Victorian. If you don't think you'd like to come, well, then, you'll miss the cookies and mulled cider and Gingerbread Candyland, but that's just more for me.

Smyrna is a family town concerned with quality living and historic preservation. Members of the Smyrna Main Street Association work to keep Smyrna a great place to live, work, and play, through retaining, expanding and recruiting business in the historic downtown while preserving the cultural and historical heritage. Enhancing streetscapes via sign and façade improvement grants, and creating attractive floral plantings, initiating promotions and fundraising events are among the Association's projects.

During the Holiday Walking Tour, if you come, visit Gingerbread Candyland on the third floor of the historic Smyrna Opera House and vote for your favorite gingerbread house contest entry. Notice I didn't say *eat* your favorite entry. But, if you must, you can bake your own and enter it, allowing you to simultaneously fulfill your historic architectural fancy and enter what visions of gingerbread dance in your head. Instructions and entry forms are available from downtown merchants.

The Smyrna Opera House is listed in the National Registry of Historic Places, one of more than 490 buildings in Smyrna qualifying. Built in 1870 as the Town Hall to knit together communities breached by the Civil War, the Opera House was

damaged by fire Christmas Night 1948 apparently ignited by a spark from holiday lights strung along the mansard roof; the clock tower and third floor were destroyed. In 1994 the Smyrna-Clayton Heritage Association, a non-profit organization, was formed to offer arts and cultural opportunities to the community. The Association, headed by President John W. Dickinson until his death in May 2001, raised \$3.6 million to restore the Opera House, half a million donated by Smyrna-Clayton citizens and businesses. Local craftsmen performed all the work on the Opera House and the new Annex. One of the performers at the opening gala in March 2003 was Frederick Douglass IV, great-great grandson of the famous orator and author who had lectured at the Opera House back when. The Opera House hall features a hand-painted coffered ceiling, a balcony, refurbished original stage and sprung hardwood floors. The 18-inch thick walls have been hand-painted and gilded by members of The Smyrna-Clayton Heritage Association. A bell was installed in the tower this year.

The Opera House offers Broadway musicals and other performances, art exhibits, piano and ballet lessons and more throughout the year.

Getting back to the spectral offerings, are there phantoms of the Opera House? Mary Turner, Opera House Executive Director and Smyrna native, said, "Most theatres are haunted in some fashion, and seem to acquire more 'visitors' with every passing decade. Certainly every one I've ever worked in has been haunted to some degree. As for the Opera House, well, I've been told by a person with certified psychic credentials that we do have 'residents,' and that it is best, perhaps, not to disturb them.

"We also feel that John W. Dickinson, our first President, maintains a benevolent presence here, watching over us, and attending many of our functions. We also believe that he intercedes on our behalf whenever we especially need assistance, or a calming hand."

"Oh, I have ghosts," Jane Leverage-Willis told me when I caught her raking leaves in front of her home, the Pope-Mustard Mansion, which she will open for the tour.

The mansion, built by Samuel Ball about 1767 was subsequently owned by Colonel John Pope, a noted Revolutionary War soldier, and in 1837 purchased by John Mustard, owner of a local tannery, who added the third floor and transformed the commanding residence into the Federal style with Greek adaptations. According to the late George Caley, Smyrna town historian, author and publisher of *Footprints of the Past*, a history of the historic homes of Smyrna, "During the time [John] Mustard occupied the mansion, tradition holds that the mansion was a stop on the Underground Railroad."

Willis, who has lived in her home since 1975, tells of a beautiful, young, dark-haired woman in a long, white dress, walking through her darkened bedroom one night and of a man dressed in a Revolutionary War uniform walking past her kitchen. Both smiled and waved to Willis.

Last year Willis, returning from vacation, came home alone to find that a squirrel had gotten into the house. The place was a mess. Willis sat down in the kitchen by the big, brick cooking fireplace (some of the bricks came from the streets of Smyrna when the town resurfaced them with macadam) and she cried. "Then," said Willis, "I felt a comforting hand on my shoulder and everything was all right."

A local psychic once visiting at the home next door to Willis, also open for the tour this year, told Willis she saw her ghost in the long white dress in Willis's back yard.

Speaking of the house next door, that architecture represents a transition from the Victorian to the Arts and Crafts, and I can't get that huge kitchen out of my mind, especially when I go to prepare a meal on our two-foot square counter.

Besides these two homes and their various residents, among the nine homes and other structures on the tour this year are the Governor William Temple Mansion, an 1860 Italianate villa built for Delaware Governor William Temple and the Italianate Clements Mansion, until recently serving as a bed and breakfast. The flying staircases and neck-craningly high ceilings with

elaborate molding are something to behold. And many visitors come back each year to see what new improvements Mike Kwiatkowski has made on his 1875 classical Revival home.

This year the ladies at historic St. Peter's Episcopal Church will be selling soup to Candlelight tourists – no ideas as to whether it will be five-bean, though. St. Peter's, one of the oldest churches in the area, was originally built in 1827 with bricks brought in tall ships as ballast.

The historic Delaware House is on the tour, too, for probably the only year. Built around 1817, later renovated and known as the Steamboat Hotel, then the Delaware House, the hostelry accommodated visiting businessmen, merchants and other travelers from the mid-19th century until 1944 when the structure was converted into a nursing home. This year the Delaware House, with new renovations just completed begins a new life housing five three-story condominiums. They are for sale. It's these I'm looking forward to seeing as well as to exploring the historic architectural aspects. With its restored portico covering the brick sidewalk reaching to the street, you can park out front and run inside, never getting wet in the rain – or, uh, snow.

Some of the merchants will open their shops during the tour. Historic downtown Smyrna is easy to get to, right off Delaware Route 1 and U.S. 13, just north of Dover, and parking is free and convenient. It's a good chance to buy your significant someone something that someone else hasn't already gotten them at the mall. No cookie-cutter stuff here; only tax-free, stress-free shopping combined with historical adventure and possible historical encounters of the supernatural kind. You can pick up books, guitars and sheet music, sporting goods, diamonds, and stop for refreshment at Sheridan's Pub. The experience borders on being an old-fashioned Christmas.

"I try to sell things that you just can't get at Wal-Mart and with utmost customer service," explained Jackie Vinyard, proprietor of The Gathering Place, 34 South Main St., where you can buy herbs, spices, teas and oddities, along with books by such local authors as Ed Okonowicz and James Milton Hanna. Vinyard might hand you

a recipe for lavender cake. She handed me one. I've baked it. It's excellent. Plus it makes your house smell almost good enough to eat. I don't know if it dispels specters, though.

Vinyard gathers conversation and lore, too. "I wanted to learn about the local history of the town so I could spread the news and keep the memories alive," she said. "The customers create the warm atmosphere in my store. They come and gather and tell their stories whether it be stories of yesterday or what's happening in their worlds today.

"We little businesses contribute funds and merchandise to other organizations without [corporate] delays," said Vinyard. "We are the watchful eyes to keep our downtown clean and safe for the community."

Vinyard has just moved The Gathering Place into the historic Odd Fellows building. Due to the extensive renovations she is making, her store will not be open for the tour but she plans to have some local items for sale at the Smyrna Opera House along with the Gingerbread House Contest.

The village begun on the banks of Duck Creek around 1776 as a small farming and shipping community named Salisbury but popularly known as Duck Creek was renamed Smyrna in 1806, about 70 years later becoming a noted center for grain, peaches and lumber.

I went to the recycling center downtown on a recent election day and a great, distraught rustling agitated the branches in the surrounding treetops. I looked up and wondered. It was like a giant squirrel distressed by something that had suddenly snatched the winter store from its home. Somebody has just died, I thought, and they don't want to leave. I left the entity in peace and went to the polls. The hot topic among locals waiting in line there was the person who had just died. So, it seems there's something about Smyrna that makes some residents want to stick around – forever. They're friendly spirits, though.

*Tickets for the Sixth Annual Holiday Candlelight Walking Tour of Historic Smyrna are on sale now from The Heart of Smyrna, at the Four Corners, 302-659-5081, or by sending a check to the Smyrna Main Street Association, P.O. Box 163, Smyrna, DE, 19977: \$12.50 if bought by December 3 and \$15.00 thereafter and at the door.

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