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Solon House
My, how the mansion has changed

Collector's cave
He's an Illini fan, and has a guesthouse to prove it

Planting an idea
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On our cover
Unique pieces combined with traditional seating at the Steve McQueen and Larry Williams home in Champaign. Photo by Robin Scholz.
Robin Scholz is no stranger to At Home.

Our talented photo editor, whose tireless work brings this new-look issue to life, has been on the house beat since the magazine’s inception.

“It’s fun to see the inside of houses that you have seen from the outside many times, and always wondered what they look like,” she said. “People are innovative with their decorating, and readers are always looking for new ideas.”

Plus …

“It’s always fun to meet homeowners and get to know them,” she said. “A three- or four-hour shoot allows for that.”

What Scholz discovered many moons ago — that our community is chock-full of amazing architecture — is something a new crop of At Home contributors now realizes, too.

For this issue, we asked several writers to leave their comfort zone — and no one hesitated.

Chris Knight, it turns out, is as good with pen and paper as he is with hammer and nail, as his interesting account of the Solon House’s magnificent upgrade clearly shows.

Scott Richey, who covers Big Ten sports for The News-Gazette, jumped at the chance to visit a local doctor’s Illini basement stuffed with memorabilia. Preps coordinator Colin Likas hit it off with his story subjects who, like him, are good at podcasting (and have been working at home during the coronavirus pandemic). Columnist Bob Asmussen — admittedly not very handy — might have learned something in profiling another stay-at-homer who used spare time to renovate. Heck, I didn’t know the first thing about a plant wall until an Urbana couple clued me in.

Even Kerry Rossow, my better half with a history of house-blogging, said yes to handling our cover story. That it involved a magnificent home owned by a pair of community difference-makers made the assignment that much more enjoyable.

We’ll do it all over again in a couple months, and we’d love to hear your ideas. If you have a house or project we should know about it, email me at jrossow@news-gazette.com. There’s a photo editor — and, now, a crop of eager writers — itching to tell your story.

- Jim Rossow
A handy type – yep, the accomplished electrician built his own house some 43 years ago – Chuck Shaw thoroughly enjoyed following through on an anniversary gift idea for his wife of 55 years, Connie.

It took Chuck two weeks to construct a flower wall outside their Urbana home, the 74-year-old wrapping up the project on the couple’s big day (April 24).

“I love it. I love flowers,” Connie said. “It’s something I enjoy every day.” Chuck got the idea from flipping through a magazine. Using cedar fence panels with dog ears cut off, he planted both sides of the wall. He also installed an automatic watering system that he purchased online.

A variety of flowers – daisies, geraniums, petunias, begonias, New Guinea impatiens – makes both sides easy on the eyes.

Not counting flowers, Chuck kept the cost under $400.

“It gives us a little privacy and shade from the sun,” Chuck said.

The Shaws lost several maple trees when tornados rocked their neighborhood in May 2019.

“We had to start from scratch,” Connie said. “We went from all shade to all sun.”

The flower wall at the end of their deck has been a considerable help – and not just during the daytime. A floodlight illuminates the area at night.

Chuck already is thinking of ways to impress Connie for their 56th anniversary. The bar, both agreed, has been set high.

“It’s one good thing that came out of a tornado,” Connie said. 🌫️
Chuck Shaw talks about how he made the flower wall for his wife, Connie, for their 55th anniversary.
Guesthouse of honor

STORY Scott Richey
PHOTOS Robin Scholz
It wouldn’t be wrong to say Tom Scaggs’ memorabilia collection began with a single autograph from then-Illinois football coach Jim Valek on the field at Memorial Stadium. He didn’t become a collector, though, until the 1990s. At first it was anything and everything. Then items from his favorite Chicago teams. Then, late in the decade, a final move to all things Illinois and into a more active, serious collector role.

The impetus? A scrappy Illini basketball team. Lon Kruger’s 1998 Big Ten champions in fact. There was just something about that squad that resonated with Scaggs, who grew up going to Illinois football and men’s basketball games with his season-ticket-holding parents.

A veteran in Jerry Hester. A go-to scorer in Kevin Turner. And the epitome of hustle in walk-on Matt Heldman in the starting lineup.

“I was like, ‘Oh my God, I need a signed basketball,’” Scaggs said. “They won that Big Ten title and, man, I can tell you that’s when it started. It was that one thing.”

Always a baseball card collector, Scaggs has narrowed his focus to, well, everything Illini.

More than 20 years after that shift in focus, Scaggs’ collection fills his guesthouse almost to bursting. The three-room building is chock-full of memorabilia from signed photos to game-worn jerseys to championship rings.

It’s a veritable tour of high point after high point in Illinois football and men’s basketball history.

**That first autograph**

Scaggs credits his parents for stoking his passion in Illinois sports. The opportunity to regularly attend men’s basketball and football games growing up simply fed it. And set up the opportunity for his first autograph as a 6-year-old in the 1969 season.

“I went up to Jim Valek, and I thought he was a player,” Scaggs said. “My dad and the coach kind of laughed. I got the coach’s autograph. That was kind of the first time I had really done anything Illinois. It really grew from there.”

**The centerpiece**

Scaggs, a former Illinois Rebounders president, might lean more toward basketball than football,
but the pinnacle of his collection comes from the gridiron in a game-worn helmet used by Red Grange, likely with the Chicago Bears. Scaggs also has a miniature of the Grange statue that stands on the west side of Memorial Stadium and an autographed copy of Grange’s autobiography.

“I don’t know how I could get anything better than that other than if the U of I sold me Grange’s jersey, which they’ll never do,” Scaggs said. “There very well may be more out there, but I’ve only seen two. The other one was a white leather helmet and was in terrible shape. Of what’s been out there and offered, I certainly have the best, and am pretty proud of that item.”

Newest big ticket item
Scaggs hit the Illinois memorabilia collecting hard when he turned the focus of his collection to the hometown team. The pace is slower now. While he picks up smaller items occasionally, he’s made fewer big additions in the last five years save for the Final Four ring he got from the 2004-05 men’s basketball season.

“That’s probably my most significant pickup,” Scaggs said. “I actually have a Final Four ring from both Final Four seasons – one each. That’s pretty cool.”

Permanent collection
Scaggs is a collector in all sense of the word. He’s simply not all that interested in selling, although he did so when his collection was featured on the Big Ten Network show “Big Ten Treasure Hunter” in 2015.

“Part of that deal – just to make that show interesting – the guy that comes deals with memorabilia,” Scaggs said. “You’re expected to sell something to him. I sold a couple of things I wouldn’t have normally sold for sure. That was kind of part of the deal, and I agreed to do that. That’s the only time I’ve really sold anything. Otherwise, no, it just keeps growing.”

Notable visitors
A closet door in Scaggs’ guesthouse features the autographs of Illinois coaches and athletes that have made the trip to his home in west Champaign to see the collection in person. Illinois Hall of Fame coach Lou Henson’s signature has a place of prominence, and is joined by the likes of John Groce, Illinois Hall of Famer Eddie Johnson and current men’s basketball coach Brad Underwood, who visited last summer.

The empty wall
Scaggs made a point to show Groce and Underwood the walls he has dedicated to Illinois’ Final Four teams from 1989 and 2005. Then he pointed out perhaps the only empty wall in his guesthouse.

“See that wall? That’s empty. That’s our national championship wall,” Scaggs said he told the Illini coaches. “It’s all waiting and ready.”

Wall of Fame
One full room in Scaggs’ guesthouse features photos of every Illinois football and basketball All-American lining the walls. Featured prominently with that part of the collection is a signed photo of Illinois’ Whiz Kids – 1942-43 Big Ten champion basketball team.

“Why that’s significant is that it’s probably the last fully signed picture they ever did,” Scaggs said. “It was going from person to person. They were sending it to each other, and before it got back to me one of them died. I’m certain it’s the last fully signed one that was ever done. That one means something to me.”

Jerseys on jerseys on jerseys
Scaggs’ jersey collection features all game-worn items with 60 available to view and probably another 100 he simply doesn’t have room to display. Scaggs shows off what he feels are the “cream of the crop,” which includes Illinois game-worn jerseys from Derek Harper, Deon Thomas, Kenny Battle and Dee Brown. A Nick Anderson game-worn jersey, though, nearly became his best.

“It was originally sold to me stating it was the jersey he wore when he made the shot against Indiana,” Scaggs said. “I proved that wrong by obtaining pictures of that shot, and it was not a
match. That one killed me. That would have been No. 1 for sure if it had been the case.”

Still hunting
Scaggs might not have added many big items to his collection in the last five years, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t looking.

“My second-best item in my collection is a Dick Butkus Chicago Bears game-used jersey,” he said. “I would love to have something Butkus (at) Illinois game-worn, whether that be a jersey or a helmet. I think the U of I has that. I don’t know if there’s anything else out there. I’ve never seen it.”

Best of the rest
While Scaggs’ collection trends heavily toward Illinois-related items, he does have a hodgepodge of collectibles from baseball cards to bats, home run balls and signed cereal boxes. The best of that bunch – at least now – is a game-worn Michael Jordan jersey and a worn Greg LeMond cycling kit. Scaggs actually sold his top non-Illinois item, Mickey Mantle’s first home run ball, years ago.

“I bought that in the mid-90s for a significant price,” he said. “When the big home run ball craze occurred with (Sammy) Sosa and (Mark) McGwire, the value of balls like that went up so significantly it was like, ‘Gosh, really now is the time to just cash in.’ … It ended up paying for all four of my kids’ all four years of college with the proceeds.”
Chris Knight on the front porch at the Solon House in Champaign.
Bringing the historic Solon House back to life

STORY Chris Knight
PHOTOS Robin Scholz
Since purchasing the Solon mansion in 2018, Chris Knight has worked feverishly to renovate one of Champaign's most significant structures. He opened its doors for photo editor Robin Scholz and, in his own words, provided an update on his work:

In 1984, just a few months after my arrival in Champaign, a well-meaning but ill-informed friend told me the Solon House was the Champaign Historical Society museum. So, I walked up the long garden path, climbed the stairs onto the porch and pressed my nose up against the window.

That's how I first met John Solon. Our second meeting happened shortly thereafter, when he threw open the front door and, brandishing a gun, suggested that I rapidly leave. Although Mr. Solon and I never met again, I well remember the awe and excitement I felt approaching his magnificent and imposing home for the first time.

Unlike other large Victorian houses, the Solon House has a simple symmetry and purity of style. It is almost plain in its absence of the frippery later Victorian architects embraced. No turrets, railings, stained or beveled glass windows, asymmetric roof lines or overblown Greek revival columns interrupt its staid, classical proportions. Sitting high in the middle of an acre of land, it overlooks Champaign, projecting austere, refined elegance.

I have often heard it described as scary, a Halloween-style haunted house, the huge, crumbling and decrepit mansion that looms menacingly in the mist. True, years of deferred maintenance have taken their toll, but I see the opposite.

To me the house is vibrant, amusing and colorful. It's the sort of place that should be filled with laughter, children and pets. It comes alive with people. Put the Christmas tree in the bay window, let the kids play hide-and-seek in the basement, invite friends and neighbors in for drinks, have the in-laws stay over.

Rather than sitting lonely and unapproachable, the house needs people. I bought it without hesitation when I heard it was for sale, with the intention of bringing back its splendor and elegance, making it friendly and inviting. Now, over two years later, all the major work has been completed, and I am left choosing the wallpaper and buying the appliances. This is an account of the work done, and how the design decisions were made.
Designed by architect Seeley Brown for local developer William Barrett, work started in 1864 and was finished in 1867. The house is an important example of the Tuscan Villa subtype of the Italianate style, and, when completed, sat on the very Western edge of the city limits. A similar, but rather grander house was built next to it. This was torn down to make way for Edison Middle School in the 1920s.

Barrett lived there for two years, and then sold it to Abel Harwood, a local and highly respected land owner and politician, for $12,000. It seems Barret didn't move out right away, and for sometime remained in the house, renting the back room from Harwood. Harwood passed away in 1891, and such was his reputation that Adlai Stevenson and other well-known politicians of the time attended his funeral in Bloomington. His wife stayed in the house until her death in 1903. The house was then rented for a few years, until Abbie and Francis Solon, a self-made man and local farmer, bought it, also for $12,000, in 1907. In 1912 they undertook major remodeling, installing central heating, hardwood floors, a bathroom, plumbing and rudimentary electrical service.

The Solons had five children, three of whom (Mary, James and John) lived in the house almost their entire lives. The house remained in the Solon family for almost 100 years. In 2005, it was donated to PACA, the Preservation and Conservation Association. They immediately replaced the roof and, with financial help from the State of Illinois, started much-needed exterior structural repairs, including rebuilding the porches and soffits, and waterproofing the basement. Had it not been for the diligent and painstaking efforts of the volunteers from PACA, the house would almost certainly not be with us today. Indeed, PACA helped obtain City of Champaign landmark status for the house, and had it added to the National Register of Historic places in 2007.

Virtually no internal work was attempted however, and when I bought the house in 2017 I imagine that (although much dirtier!) the inside was not very different from when the Solon family finished their remodeling.
Top: Original flooring in the master bedroom.
Right: A ceiling medallion around a light fixture.
Far right: An original fireplace.
Owner Chris Knight talks about the cabinets for the kitchen area.
When the Solons modernized the house in 1912 (and we know it was 1912 because scrawled on the back of a piece of door trim from that remodel, in large flowing script, are the words ‘Hurrah for Bull Moose!’), they took out dividing walls, thus enlarging the second-floor bedrooms, added a second-floor bathroom, a ground floor toilet, laid down quarter sawn oak, parquet and maple floors, added a single electric light pendant in the main rooms, and put in gas-fired, hot water central heating (the boiler for which remains in the basement, looking like something from the Titanic).

Since then very little has changed. Other than the changes made by the Solons, the house is almost as it was when built, 153 years ago.
It has not been chopped up into apartments, and no modern additions have been attempted. I do not plan to change this, and the house will remain a single family home, with a floor plan similar to the original Seeley Brown design.

But the house sat empty for almost 30 years. The roof leaked. The floors were rotten, and in places could not hold your weight. A chimney blew over in 2005 and crashed through the roof and bedroom ceiling. A fire left the kitchen covered in soot. Squirrels and raccoons called the west wing home for decades. Wallpaper peeled off the walls, ceiling plaster covered the floors, revealing the plaster and lathe construction underneath.

I have tried to restore its elegance and presence, without sacrificing the wear that 153 years have left on it. Worn stair treads have been retained, floors have not been sanded flat, original varnish textures are kept, and even the mouse holes in the kitchen baseboard are still there!

I am neither trying to make it appear modern, nor creating a Victorian design aesthetic. The house predates common Victorian style by 20 years or more, and trying to make it look like an 1890s house is inappropriate. Which all poses a bit of a problem. How best to combine modern convenience with historical authenticity?

In this case, I am retaining the original feel of the house while discretely importing modern technology where appropriate. Light fixtures, plumbing, heating and AC will be modern, functional, efficient and discrete. Fridges and freezers will replace the root cellar and pantry, cooktops will replace wood burning stoves, forced air heating will replace pot-bellied stoves. And of course modern showers and toilets will replace the commodes and tin baths of the 1860s.

It is extraordinary how far design has advanced since 1867. Back then there was almost no internal plumbing. Bathrooms as we know them were nonexistent (enameled iron claw foot tubs only appeared in the 1890s), and toilets were commodes, or worse, buckets. Rather than running water, rain was collected and stored in a brick cistern in the basement, and hand pumped up for cooking, washing and cleaning.

One of the most iconic features is the house’s square cupola, which rises some 8 feet above the center of the flat roof, and, according to Wikipedia, “is a defining element of the Tuscan Villa form.”

But why is it there? I think more people have asked about it than any other part of the house. Is it, as some have suggested, a lookout, to allow the owners a vantage point from which to watch for an attack by the native population? Certainly back then, sitting as it did, on the very edge of town, it would provide a view over the fields. But the reality of the situation is more mundane. The cupola is there to provide passive air conditioning. On hot days its windows would be opened, and the hot air escaping out of them would draw in cooler air from the basement. To facilitate the process, two internal chimneys ran from the basement to the second-floor rooms. And the high ceilings, 11 feet on the ground floor and 10 feet on the second floor, would amplify the process. Although certainly it would do little to relieve the humidity, I imagine it provided a fairly efficient (and cost-effective) way of controlling the temperature in the days before electricity allowed active air conditioning.

The new tub, shower and tile in the master bath which was made out of one of the smaller bedrooms.
First, we needed a proposed floor plan. This was relatively simple. Downstairs basically retained the existing room layout. Upstairs was more complicated. The two large rooms on either side of the hall were retained as master and guest bedroom. The two smaller bedrooms were assigned to master bathroom and guest bathroom. The servants bedroom in the west wing would become the second guest room, and the servants living room became the laundry room, thus giving us a three-bedroom, 2½-bathroom house. The attic and basement are to be left untouched.

After all the old heating and water pipes, left over from the Solon’s remodeling, had been removed, and the basement cleared of obstructions, we could start work. First the floors had to be leveled and made structurally secure. We reinforced the floor joists, removed many of the massively heavy radiators, (added in 1912, and which, after 30 years of sitting in an unheated house, had cracked beyond repair), and gently jacked up the floors by ¼-inch a day.

Next came the central heating and air conditioning. With a unit in the basement serving the ground floor, and another in the attic for the second floor, we needed to cut through the walls in the basement for the duct work. The second floor was much easier, since we could run the ducts between the second-floor ceiling joists.

There are 38 large windows in the house. Not one was in working condition, but I didn’t want to replace them with modern double glazed units, even if that had been an option. I like the old, wavy glass. So, with the help of master carpenter Tim Conley, every single window was removed, and painstakingly rebuilt, retaining as much of the old wood as possible. Sash weights were cut or added to, to compensate for any change in weight. The original glass was retained whenever possible, and I salvaged sufficient wavy antique glass to replace it where necessary. The whole process has taken the best part of two years, but I imagine the windows now work better than when they were new!

Bathrooms and laundry room were framed out, and the plumbing lines run. Planning the lighting was harder. Since the house was not designed for electric lights it was impossible to simply upgrade the old wiring. There was virtually none. I settled for one or two large chandeliers in the
main rooms, and wall sconces for accent lighting. Setting sconces in obvious positions, like either side of a main door, gave us a total of over 40 wall sconces. Each one required trenching the brick to hide the wiring. A massive task!

Once that was complete though, we could deal with the main surfaces, the floors, ceilings and walls. Rather than try piecemeal repairs on the latter, I opted to have the entire house replastered, using wet plaster rather than drywall where possible.

Having no interest in making the floors look new, I sanded the pine planks, retaining where possible the traffic wear patterns. The later floors added by the Solons were similarly sanded, with spectacular results.

All of which brings us to the present, choosing the wall paper, installing kitchen and bathroom cabinets, and buying the appliances. We are almost done. And I cannot wait to finally fill the once foreboding old house with conversation, laughter and people. I hope the Harwoods, Solons, and Mr. Seeley Brown himself would have approved. 😊
Keith Gibson and Sam Erwin are nearly lifelong friends, having grown up together in Flora and graduating from its high school in 1999 and 1995, respectively. Gibson now lives in Champaign and Erwin in Paducah, Ky., but the two come together weekly to record the "Behind The Mic Show."
The sports-centric talk show featuring Gibson and Erwin as co-hosts debuted in April 2019 and recently released its 58th episode – not including special broadcasts such as coverage of a local high school football game.

Their first-ever guest was former Chicago Cubs pitcher Spencer Patton, and other individuals who have joined include former New England Patriots placekicker Stephen Gostkowski, ex-Illini athletes Dylan Meyer and Dana Howard, Oakwood native and dirt-track racer Bobby Pierce and Counting Crows drummer Steve Bowman.

“We don’t take ourselves serious, and that’s I think what draws everybody in,” said Gibson, a Busey Bank executive who formerly worked for Danville-based radio station WDAN. ”We draw over 1,000 views a week just from Facebook, and 200 or 250 downloads a week from podcasts. It’s grown a lot faster than I think either of us would say we expected.”

What makes the collaborative effort between Gibson and Erwin, who works for an alcohol distribution company, even more unique is the location from which Gibson does his share of the podcast.

After he, wife Lori and their now-4-year-old daughter moved into the home in March of 2017, Keith Gibson and Erwin set out to create a “man cave” within the property. The duo tore down some drywall separating the garage proper from a small room attached at its back. That small space initially was going to constitute the entirety of the man cave.

“We decided it just wasn’t big enough,” Gibson said. “So we kind of took over the rest of the garage. And the deal was I have to clean cars off in the winter and make sure they’re warm enough.”

Thus the “Cheap Seats Sports Bar and Grill” was born.

That small space in the back now is Gibson’s office from which he works on the podcast weekly, with Erwin recording from his own home in Kentucky. In the larger former garage space is invite-only bar. The entire setup’s walls are lined with sports memorabilia, primarily of Chicago Cubs, University of Illinois and professional wrestling nature. There’s one TV in the bar area and another in Gibson’s office, and the floor is covered with faux grass.

“It was probably like a couple hours (of work) a day, and then one day we went nuts and did 10 hours and knocked a bunch of things out just to get it done,” Erwin said. “We had the grand opening coming up (in August 2018) that we put...
a lot of time into. It was never a struggle or what I consider work. It was just two guys hanging out.”

That epitomizes both the at-home office/bar and podcast, which Gibson and Erwin spoke a bit more about.

Do you consider this setup a true office?
Gibson: Yes and no. At night, this is where I do all my work. I’ll turn the TV on (and) we brainstorm a lot down here.

Erwin: It’s also a place where we can be creative. It’s also a place where friends can come over and hang out be themselves. It serves a lot of purposes.

Have you guys ever seen an office quite like this?
Gibson: One. It was up in Chicago, and it was my dream man cave/office. The guy had a huge Cubs circular bar. But he said he spent like $250,000 on it, which I spent maybe $1,500 redoing this entire garage.

What’s the most unique piece of memorabilia in the setup?
Gibson: I’m probably sitting underneath the most unique thing, and that’s (a photo of Gibson, Erwin and Gibson’s father in a professional wrestling ring in southern Illinois). How many guys can say they’ve been a world champion in a wrestling ring? 😄

Actual foul balls from Wrigley Field and memorabilia decorate the office/studio/garage of Keith Gibson’s home.
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Time well spent

WITH stay-at-home orders in place, Kollin Marquardt found himself with extra time on his hands. Lots of extra time.

What to do:
Catch up on his favorite Netflix series? Watch every major league baseball game? Read the “Harry Potter” series?


Instead, Marquardt, decided to channel his inner Chip and Joanna Gaines. The Waco, Texas, couple hosts the uber-popular “Fixer Upper” on HGTV.

Marquardt is a big fan.

With the full support of wife Bailea, Marquardt renovated the kitchen in their Tuscola home, which is a few blocks from the downtown square.

Call it COVID-19 Construction.

“With the quarantine, obviously (work) hours got cut a little short, so it allowed me a little bit more time to focus on that home project,” said Marquardt, facility manager for the Savoy Recreation Center.

“It was the perfect time to do it.”

Marquardt replaced the countertops, painted the cabinets, retiled the backsplash, installed a new sink and lights.

The do-it-yourself project took him about two months, working mostly on weekends.

“It wasn’t every day,” he said.

He had completed other projects in the past: a half-bath, some flooring and a few accent walls.

But this was the 28-year-old’s first kitchen remodel.

“I’ve just kind of learned as we go from family members and a lot of Youtube videos,” Marquardt said. “I didn’t go in blind-sided.”
“Oh, yes,” he said.

Soon, the phone might be ringing, with family members and friends asking Marquardt to help them with a rehab.

“I’ve had a few friends come over and ask how I did things,” Marquardt said. “I’ve given them some tips.”

Marquardt’s best friend is now remodeling his own kitchen.

“We’ve been bouncing ideas off each other,” Marquardt said.

Marquardt, who grew up in Champaign and graduated from Central High School, learned from watching shows on HGTV and paying attention to work done by his dad.

He got frustrated a time or two while working on the kitchen. What did he think when it was all done?

“I said ‘Wow,’” Marquardt said. “It’s like finishing a marathon. It feels like you accomplished something.”

The adventure went like Marquardt hoped. Well, almost.

“I hit some bricks in the road, or maybe I didn’t have a tool that I needed,” Marquardt said.

“But there was never a point where I was stuck or didn’t know what to do. It was just a matter of having the materials that I needed.

“Once I got that figured out, it was smooth sailing.”

With outside activities limited by the coronavirus, Marquardt wanted to take advantage of the opening.

“Our weekends have been mainly staying at home and getting stuff done around the house,” Marquardt said.

Bailea stained and sealed the countertops. Their 3-year-old son Kason also pitched in.

“He tried to help,” Marquardt said. “He wants to move the paint brush around here and there.”

The most important part? The cost. Or lack thereof.

Doing the work themselves saved the Marquardts a ton on labor.

They built the dark wood countertops themselves, spending about $100 on lumber. The stain and sealer cost $50. The farmhouse sink ran $200. Light fixtures were another $70, and the subway tile and grout totaled $75.

That’s just under $500 for a new kitchen. Marquardt estimates it would have cost at least four times that to get it done by a professional.

Marquardt isn’t done fixing up the house. Up next is a makeover for their full bathroom – replacing the flooring, installing a new sink, etc.

His recently completed project makes Marquardt eager to take on more.
Not only does one of the area's largest mansions have new owners, but it has new neighbors, too, thanks to the Champaign County Forest Preserve.

A family plans to use the 16,000-square-foot Hidden River mansion near Mahomet as a private residence, said Shawn Tabeling, of Tabeling Development Co. Like the previous owners, the new ones plan to remain confidential, he said.

Tabeling declined to share the sale price, but said that after the asking price was reduced to $1.5 million, “we had a few parties interested.”

The sale includes the mansion and 15 acres of land it sits on. Tabeling plans to sell the rest of the 200-acre development in 50- to 10-acre lots.

In June, the Champaign County Forest Preserve bought about 93 wooded acres along the Sangamon River north and west of the mansion.

The forest preserve bought the land for about $6,000 per acre, its deputy director for planning and development, Michael Daab, said. It was able to purchase the land with a grant from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation.

“And with that comes the expectation that we maintain it as a natural area in perpetuity,” Daab said.

It won’t become a park, he said, but will be open to the public, much like Hidden Acres near Homer Lake.

The Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation provided an additional $10,000 for an initial restoration of the site, Daab said, which will include removing non-native trees and shrubs that are abundant in about a quarter of the land.

The Hidden River mansion was built in the early 2000s for software developer Bruce Artwick, a UI graduate and creator of the first consumer flight simulator software, which eventually became the Microsoft Flight Simulator.

While Artwick owned it, the estate was once listed for $14.9 million and later for $6.9 million. He owned it until 2015, when it was sold at auction for $4,000,005.

The mansion includes five bedrooms, 7½ bathrooms, a floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace, a five-car garage, a sauna, an indoor hot tub and a plunging pool.
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Many of us share a cup of sugar or a stick of butter with our neighbors. Steve McQueen and Larry Williams share their home with their community.
Curved walls lead into the dining room from the living room at the Steve McQueen and Larry Williams home in Champaign. They were able to preserve the original slate floors.
“If we have something that is needed, we share it,” McQueen said.

In December 2015, they bought the 6,000-square-foot ranch on the south edge of Champaign from a dear friend, which began their labor of love.

They acted as their own general contractors and renovated the house from “top to bottom, front to back, and everything in between,” McQueen said.

Some 2½ years later, the house has become not just a haven for the couple, but a hub for parties, fundraisers and neighborhood gatherings. Their annual holiday open house typically has over 600 on the guest list.

They maintained the original footprint of the home but renovated the space to reflect their vision. In a nod to the past, the original blueprints hang in a guest suite. A separate courtyard entry provides a private entrance for overnight guests.

The six-bedroom, six-bath home also has several kitchenettes and separate spaces to offer private suites to overnight or long-term guests.

“Having six bedrooms makes it super easy to extend an invitation to those needing a safe place, especially during the bad-weather months,” McQueen said.

The home originally had seven bedrooms, but to accommodate a master suite and utility room, the seventh bedroom was transformed.

The master bathroom boasts a double sink and walk-in shower. Moving the utility room to the main floor made an additional kitchenette in the basement possible.

Top: The front entryway, left, and a hallway include a framed greeting to welcome their guests, “Whether worker, friend or neighbor...new or old, thank you for being part of our home.”

Above: The living room looks out to the backyard and pool.
Above: Fugerty in the living area of the guest suite. The original blueprints offer a nod to the past.

Below: The guest suite’s kitchen includes a wrapped fridge.

Right: Looking through the glass doorway to the small patio outside the guest suite.
The kitchen is an eclectic mix of vintage finds and modern amenities.
Conscientious of the energy a house this size requires, the couple incorporated solar energy.

The spacious kitchen is the heart of their home. They can seat six at the kitchen table and seven at the breakfast bar.

“No matter where we serve our guests, they always wind up in the kitchen,” McQueen said.

The kitchen sums up the entire theme of the house: eclectic.

They clearly love the juxtaposition of vintage and modern: there are modern appliances to accommodate hosting and cooking for large gatherings to complement a vintage icebox and antique stove.

There is a long carrera marble countertop paired with restored oak pieces. Each piece seems to hold a story and it is clear that Steve and Larry share the “if you love it, if it has a story, find a place for it” motto.
Right: Steve McQueen and Larry Williams have collected a mix of eclectic pieces over their 32 years together.

Below: The seventh bedroom was converted to create the spacious master bath, including double sinks and a walk-in shower.
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Autographed photos throughout the house come with their own stories, too. Williams taught and directed for 33 years, following in his mother’s footsteps (she also taught for 33 years). He began collecting the photos – great conversation starters at their parties – over 20 years ago.

“We love unusual items in our house. Many of our pieces come from Texture Home. They know our style and always seem to have just the right thing,” McQueen said.

McQueen and Williams also love to go exploring for antiques and original art pieces. They find unexpected uses for vintage pieces, like the fire hose cabinet that is now used to house pool towels.

The south side of the house is lined with large windows, which allow the natural light to stream into the home. The windows also offer a view of the pool and garden area.

Top: One of the great rooms.
Middle: Fogerty inspects the guest suite.
Bottom: Maine Coon cats Vanessa and Spelvin hang out in the master bedroom.
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Above: The backyard pool and seating area were scheduled to be part of the Master Gardener’s Walk 2020 until it was canceled due to COVID-19.

Left: Veggies and flowers grow in the garden.

Below: The fire table area of the backyard. McQueen and Williams include a vintage fire hose cabinet, which houses pool towels.
With outdoor seating for 50 and an outdoor kitchen, they are able to expand their entertaining in the warmer months. They were scheduled to be on the Master Gardener’s Walk 2020 but, due to COVID-19, it was canceled. Not to be discouraged, they are already planning for the 2021 event.

During this unprecedented time, McQueen and Williams are making their home a soft spot to fall.

“During the pandemic, our friends know that they can bring their families to our pool,” McQueen said. “We allow one family at a time and respect social distancing guidelines so they can have a safe outdoor space to enjoy. In 20 years, we want people to drive by our home and tell their kids that they swam and played in our pool during the pandemic of 2020.” 🌂
In 2013, News-Gazette columnist Tom Kacich introduced ‘Tom’s Mailbag,’ a wildly popular online and print feature in which he answers reader questions (submit them any time at news-gazette.com).

Often, he’s asked about historical houses in our area. Like this one ...

**Q:** “Every day I drive past the beautiful home at 1016 W. University Ave. in Champaign. I’m curious as to its origins.”

**A:** It was built around 1929 by L.D. Lewis, who was the vice president and treasurer of the W. Lewis and Co. department store in downtown Champaign, and sold around 1940 to Jerome J. Sholem, who owned a series of shoe stores in East Central Illinois.


She noted that it was designed by local architect George Ramey, who also was supervising architect for the Virginia Theatre, as well as a number of other local structures – Champaign City Building, the Eastlawn (Cemetery) Burial Park Tower (since razed) and the building at 134 W. Church St. that originally was a grocery store.

“When considering the style of 1016 W. University, it is interesting to remember that the architect supervised the construction of the Virginia Theatre, which exhibits Italian Renaissance and Spanish Mediterranean influences. Both influences are seen in 1016 W. University.”
toward the end of the stylistic period. One look up and down the streets of its neighborhood, however, will confirm that the choice of its style was a bold statement for Champaign, Illinois. The house has had the good fortune to be maintained without major alterations to this day, so we may enjoy the artistic handling of these Mediterranean influences.”

Hoffman said that the revival of interest in Italian Renaissance home construction came in the late 1880s and 1890s.

“The perfection of masonry veneering techniques after World War I helped in duplicating the construction of stucco or masonry walls. The period from 1915 to the late 1930s became the era of the eclectic period houses in which Mediterranean influences can be found,” she wrote. “This house dates to 1926 which is
The music flowed out of Janice Reed’s family’s barn just outside of Mattoon on warm nights in the early 1950s.

For months, the family spent every weekend and evening at the old family barn, clearing out the old pieces of furniture and finding a few old keepsakes. They cleaned all the nooks and crannies. They took old wood they found throughout the barn to fill in the floorboards, built a staircase to replace the ladder that went up to the second floor, installed electrical wiring and made light fixtures out of old wagon wheels.

“There wasn’t a lot wrong with the barn,” Sean said. “It was just piled full of stuff. It just took a lot of labor to clean it out and get repairs made.”

Janice picked out a large chandelier, and at 4 a.m. two nights before the wedding, they hoisted it up into the rafters.

“Once you saw it go up, I can remember getting goosebumps,” Kris said. “It’s like, OK, wow. This is really cool.”

The weather was beautiful on the day of the wedding, and around 150 people packed into the loft for dinner and dancing. For Janice, it was just like old times.

“It was kind of like a fairy tale,” she said. “We just wanted something special for the kids. And then we walked in there and it was actually more than you hoped ... I can’t even explain it. You take an old coin and you polish it, you know? And this was kind of like an old coin. But then you kind of polish it, and it had its shine back.” 🌟

When her parents would host neighborhood parties, she remembers sitting on bails of hay and having meals with the families who lived on the farms in the area before they danced in the upstairs loft.

“It was just a wonderful social gathering with your neighbors,” she said.

Her daughter, Kris Bott of Arcola, could almost visualize those parties when she walked into the barn as a child growing up on the farm, even though it didn’t resemble what it once was. In the late 50s, the family began using the barn for storage. Old equipment, household items and children’s toys that were no longer needed piled up in the ensuing decades, and she’s sure more than a few rodents died in the space.

“It was always very dirty and gross,” she said, “and it smelled like a typical barn.”

Through the years, the structure of the barn that was built in 1905 stayed strong, even though the musty smell became powerful. Last summer, Bott’s husband had an idea.

Sean Bott is an architect with the firm Reifsteck Reid and Company in Champaign. With their son, Tyler Bugos, getting married in September, Sean formulated an idea to renovate the old barn into a venue for the reception.

“He definitely always has a vision for things, and you have to trust that vision a lot of times,” Kris said. “He always tries to very well explain things.”

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