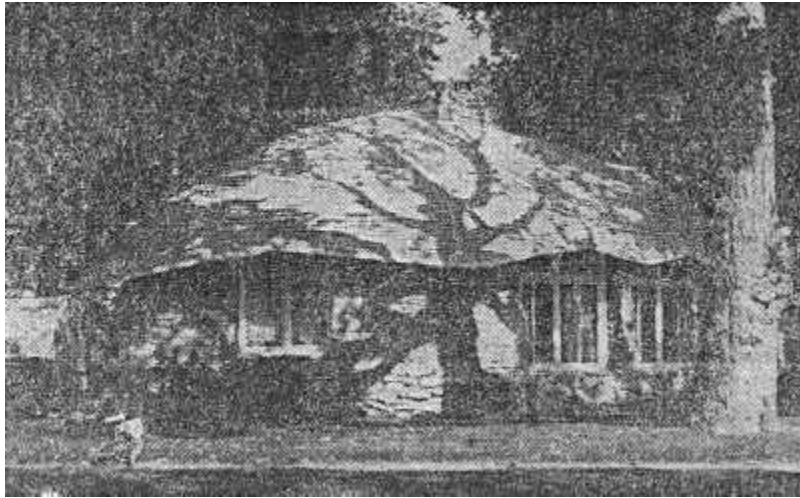


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Creative Home Builder Ignores Old Age, Almost ...

By BOB SCULLEY
Feature Editor



**An Earl Young "Mushroom" Home at Charlevoix
(Daily News Photo by Bob Sculley)**

On vacation last month, we drove from our Indian River campsite to Charlevoix to meet the man who builds those famous "mushroom" homes.

We didn't know his name. But driving through Charlevoix three years ago, we had discovered his memorable mushroom homes.

Now, on this second visit, we wanted to meet their creator.

Charlevoix, population 2,751, is ranked by many as the crown jewel of Michigan's resplendent West Coast.

Unlike some unfortunate Western Michigan communities, Charlevoix has carefully preserved its scenic coastal values -- both along the lake and in the harbor -- for public view and enjoyment.

And the unique mushroom homes add much to the city's attraction.

These homes, which seem to spring from the ground, get their nickname from their gently rounded irregularly shaped shingle roofs.

Sometimes the rooflines sweep so close to the ground that side windows are cut into them. The homes feature large fireplaces, generous use of stonework, and creative landscaping which helps the houses blend and snuggle into the hillsides.

Modest Size

Most of the mushroom homes are not large, but modest in size.

We took our bikes out of the van and pedalled to the Charlevoix Chamber of Commerce office for information about the city, and about the builder of the mushroom homes.

The chamber office was closed.

"Who's the man who builds those mushroom homes?" we asked a lady-clerk in a nearby drugstore.

"Oh, that's Earl A. Young," she answered. "His office is right down the street there in the Weathervane Building."

We biked to the Weathervane Building -- an Earl Young structure consisting of a motel, restaurant and office space-- overlooking the broad clean channel linking Charlevoix Harbor with Lake Michigan.

I knocked on the office door and walked into the reception area. No one was there.

Then, from an inner room, emerged Earl A. Young.

He is a tiny, aged man, perhaps 4 feet-11 inches in height.

Billowing Scarf

He was wearing a flowing orange blouse with a billowy brown silk scarf tied into a large bow at his throat.

He wore a hearing aid and very thick glasses.

We shook hands. He peered around me, looking in the direction of my 165-pound wife silhouetted in the doorway a few feet away.

"Is there someone with you?" he asked. Then I realized how much of his vision was gone.

We began talking about his mushroom homes.

I had brought my camera. I asked if I could take a portrait photograph of him. I asked if he would grant an interview.

He said no to the photograph. He gently demurred on the interview.

Earl Young was not thirsting for publicity. For one thing, he doesn't need it. He and his houses have been featured in many newspapers and in Holiday Magazine.

And, like many men who care deeply about their work, he was not anxious to have his carefully developed creative ideas misrepresented through the vagaries of journalism.

But he was willing, eager, to converse informally about his building career.

Creative Designer

"I'm not a registered architect," Young told me, but original design is his forte.

Young is a lifetime resident of the Charlevoix area. His home-building ideas parallel Frank Lloyd Wright's theory of organic architecture in which the structure harmonizes with, and seems a living part of, its environment.

The mushroom roofs are part of the effort to blend the house with its site. "I always build the roof first, and then shove the house under it," he told me.

In 54 years, Young said, he has built only 40 of the stone mushroom houses.

And like any limited supply of art, their value constantly increases. One home, built by Young some decades ago for \$14,600, recently brought an offer (declined) of \$75,000.

Young said he doesn't take on many home-building commissions any more. "After all, I'm past 80," he said.

But if people want one of his mushroom homes, I asked, wouldn't he at least sell them a copy of the construction plans?

"Oh no," he said, shaking his head and waving his hands in rejection, "That wouldn't do at all. Every house must be designed for its site."

Young's telephone rang, and he answered it.

Alibied Eavesdropping

His phone is equipped with a loud speaker device attached to the receiver. I could eavesdrop on all that was said.

Great!

The woman-caller inquired if Young had any houses to rent.

"No ma'am, I'm sorry," he told her. "There are no houses to rent in Charlevoix."

After he hung up, he told me, "That's the second call today for a house to rent. But there just aren't any."

Resuming our conversation, Young said, "You're from Ludington? You know Bob Nelson? He does a lot of our work."

I gathered, as he continued talking, that Young is choosy about which contractors he selects to carry out his highly personalized ideas. Robert O. Nelson of Ludington has built three of Young's recent houses, and remodeled four others.

Young showed us large photos of old Charlevoix, and of some of the houses of the houses he has built, including the one he lives in today.

Discussing his construction ideas, Young's hands and voice took on animation and vitality. I recalled Somerset Maugham's comment that, "Death overlooks small people."

No Time For Aging

In Young's case, it seemed to me, the key to his vigor involved more than physical factors. It involves a man who will not yield to age because he is too much in love with his work.

The phone rang again. "Daddy," said the caller, ... It was his daughter. She had checked one of Young's construction projects that morning, she told her father, and the contractor was not using enough straw to achieve a textured effect on some wall.

Young thanked his daughter for the message, said he'd take care of it.

He was a busy man. We thanked him for the brief visit and left.

But as we pedalled away, I felt keen regret.

Regret that circumstances had precluded my knowing him better, had precluded the rare opportunity of peering into the creative wellsprings which produced Earl A. Young.