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Stone Lover Builds Solid, Artful Heritage

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CHARLEVOIX'S stone home builder, Earl Young.

CHARLEVOIX -- Stone houses seem to sprout as naturally as dandelions from the soil of this pleasant Lake Michigan resort community.

And they do because of an already legendary 84-year-old man named Earl A. Young, who built them all.

For more than half a century Young has combed lonesome fields and dusty quarries searching for the odds and ends of nature. He blends stones and timber with an architect's skill and a geologist's respect for his raw material, and so far he has fitted more than 40 local landscapes with his art.

"I HAVE A very strong feeling for stone," Young explained recently as he sat in his wood-paneled office on the lower level of one of his most flamboyant creations, the Weathervane Inn, a local restaurant.

"Stones have their own personalities. People say I'm crazy when I say so, but they really do. Why I found a stone that weighed 160 tons. It was formed 350 million years ago at the bottom of a warm sea and was carried here 10,000 years ago by glaciers."

Young said he knows the history of his most important finds because he chips off pieces and sends them away to be analyzed by geologists.

Young calls himself a realtor, but nearly all the people of Charlevoix consider him that and more.

He was born within 30 miles of Charlevoix and has lived in the area all his life -- except for a few years a long time back when he studied architecture at the University of Michigan. As he tells it he couldn't stomach the artistic conservatism of his professors, so he dropped out and never got his college degree.

That lack of academic credentials hasn't slowed him down, but it explains why he is so careful always to call himself "realtor," never an architect.

"HE'S A GENIUS," the owner of one of his homes remarked. "To me he's the opposite of Frank Lloyd Wright. He puts a lot of warmth into his houses. He's never built a house without at least one fireplace and some have two or more.

"He's Mr. Charlevoix," the woman added.

Edward Hanson, the mayor Charlevoix, said Young is a "venerable man" who is taken a bit for granted by the people here because he's been around for such a long time. He added that Young has contributed to the town as no other man has.

Some of his contributions have been resented by townspeople. Every once in a while Young will find a boulder or other interesting natural oddment which his eye tells him belongs in a city park. So, he hauls it there and leaves it -- placed precisely as he thinks it should be.

While this sort of eccentricity has generated some friction between Young and some Charlevoix residents, it is mostly tolerated with civic grace.

None of these donations has ever been removed by the city.

Young built his first stone house in 1918 to live in after marrying his high-school sweetheart, Irene. His daughter and son-in-law now live in it.

Young explained he went into building houses because he couldn't get builders to do what he wanted them to do.

"I HIRED A mason and asked him to work with me to teach me how to break and set stone. I've never built anything but stone buildings," he added.

"People would help me look for stones. Years ago masons were easy. I could tell them exactly what to do. They would lift stones. I've outlived six masons."

In recent years, Young added, he works with masons and contractors, telling them precisely where each stone must be placed, but they are less co-operative and patient.

"It drives them crazy. But I know what I want," he said.

Once in 1928 while Young was building a street, he found a stone -- his favorite stone -- sticking out of the earth. It was a mammoth rock weighing nine tons, 260 pounds.

"I knew I'd want to use it some day. So I had a team of horses carry it away and I buried it," he said.

In 1954 he reclaimed the stone, which is very much like a map of lower Michigan, including bold pink veins marking highway routes.

THAT YEAR Young fulfilled a 10-year dream too by purchasing an old flour mill on the Pine River Channel in downtown Charlevoix. He transformed it into a restaurant. Young decided to use his prize stone as the dominant stone in the restaurant's fireplace.

He had kept the stone's measurements in his head for nearly 30 years, as he tells the story. But when the stone was being lowered through the rafters of the building, it could not pass. It was too large.

To this day Young, with a chuckle, sticks to the original explanation he gave to the angry workmen: "It grew 11 inches during all those years in the woods."

The giant stone-map today is part of only one of the five fireplaces in the Weathervane Inn. Another piece in the fireplace is a meteorite of iron. It fell years ago over Michigan and was first discovered by Indians. A second meteorite decorates the Inn's signpost outside.

"I really put myself into the Weathervane Inn," Young said.

The Inn's upstairs bar was constructed from pieces of an old shipwreck. Tables are made from walnut stumps. Outside lamps are nearly century old street lights from Copenhagen.

Young designed and supervised construction of the whole complex, including its fixtures. He owned it for a few years, then sold it on condition that he could maintain an office in the lower level, over looking the Pine River Channel.

TOURISTS WHO pass through here are often taken by the Weathervane Inn and end up driving through the city snapping pictures of the stone houses Young built here.

"Detail, that's my success. I build each house as you paint a picture ... something you can enjoy ... something that will live after you that others can enjoy."

Young builds each house to fit its landscape and the needs and personality of the family that will live there. They have sold at prices ranging from a modest \$12,000 to well over \$100,000.

Once he moved in with a Chicago family for awhile to get an idea of their life-style and habits before he designed and built their house.

Young continues to work almost every day in his office where the wood walls are polished not by varnish, but by 100 years of flour which flowed down the chute of the old flour mill.

His eyes and ears are failing him but he is working on a book about his life and work in Charlevoix and the beauty of this glacially carved lakeside town.

"My favorite building of all?"

He smiled and said: "My next one."

"I've got my own ideas but I'm not talking."



One of Young's homes in Charlevoix "Stones have their own personalities"