

Detroit Free Press, July 9, 1993

Caught under the spell of mushrooms Tour highlights homes of Charlevoix builder



Ice Age boulders of the Great Lakes region and wavy overhanging shingled roofs are a trademark of the late Earl Young's mushroom-shaped houses. (Photo - Patricia Burnett Siler / Special to the Free Press)

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Fudgies, take note.

Thousands of you visit the Little Traverse Bay area each summer and succumb to the ubiquitous aroma of chocolate wafting from the fudge shops of Harbor Springs, Petoskey and Charlevoix the beautiful. (Some of the locals refer to such tourists as "fudgies.")

Ever consider doing mushrooms, instead?

Try a walking tour of the "mushroom" houses of the late Charlevoix real estate developer Earl Young.

The best way to describe them: Think about the digs of Hansel and Gretel. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Little Red Riding Hood's grandma.

And think: Why would anyone pay \$100,000 for an 800-square-foot house?

Buyers snap up these unusual homes as soon as they go on the market. They have a distinctive charm that have made them a sought-after commodity and a special tourist attraction.

If you live in one, you have to be prepared for people taking pictures of your house almost daily, says Jeannine Wallace, owner of Shop of the Gulls gift shop. Her Earl Young house will be open on the Charlevoix Area Hospital Home Tour Wednesday.

Young, at 5-feet-4, loved the cozy cottages in the rural areas of Great Britain. From the 1920s-1970s, he transferred these images to Charlevoix and built, without plans, many homes and several commercial buildings, including the Weathervane Terrace Hotel.

The Ice Age boulders of the Great Lakes region were his favorite building material. They became his signature, along with the wavy, overhanging shingled roofs he used. These give the smaller homes a mushroom-like shape.

"My name for them is 'Early Mother Goose,'" says Charlevoix architect Jack Begrow, a friend of Young's who sometimes remodels and enlarges the homes for present-day owners.

"Earl used to bury certain boulders he found so no one would take them before he could use them," Begrow says. "He'd create the houses as he went along, just pacing off the rooms to the builder."

Young died in 1975. The largest concentration of his work is Boulder Park, a development of vacation homes near Lake Michigan. Some of his most imaginative houses are on Park Street, and his own, a spacious multilevel structure is on Clinton Street.

You could take a driving tour of the houses, but if you want to eat your fudge and have it, too, walk off the calories while taking a peek at these fairy-tale abodes.

Free pamphlets on Earl Young homes and locations are available from the Charlevoix Chamber of Commerce 408 Bridge St., Charlevoix 49720.

The Northern Michigan Panhellenic Council will host a luncheon and slide presentation of Earl Young's buildings at noon Wednesday at the Weathervane Restaurant. The show will be narrated by his daughter, designer Virginia Young Olsen. Reservations limited, \$9.50. Call 1-616-347-7565, 9-5 through July 12.

Tickets for July 14 Charlevoix Area Hospital Home Tour, 1-5 p.m., are \$12, available at Shop of the Gulls on Bridge Street or homes along the tour.