

The Grand Rapids Press, Sunday, September 12, 1993

FANCIFUL SMURFSVILLE

The whimsical-looking homes in a Charlevoix resort community offer visual surprises inside and out

By Joan Huyser-Honig
The Grand Rapids Press



Unusual touches to the Ray and Jacqueline MacGillivray home, include a wavy cedar shake roof and cartoony chimney, signatures of creator Earl Young.

Nestled behind hillocks, half-hidden under climbing ivy and fallen leaves, the stone cottage seems to spring up like a mushroom from the earth.

A wavy cedar shake roof and whimsical chimney top the home in Charlevoix, a vintage resort town in northern Michigan.

"People have always called mine the Mushroom House, but I'm giving it a new nickname," says owner Jeannine Wallace. "I call it Boulder-Dash." Now in her late fifties, she and her late husband bought the home in 1964.

It is one of 26 stone houses built or remodeled in Charlevoix between 1918 and the 1950s by Earl Young, a real estate developer and dropout of University of Michigan architecture school.

The whimsically designed houses look somewhat like a village of the Smurfs, a one-time popular cartoon show. Wallace has retained that fun look inside and out, while in another resort home, whimsy plays a secondary role. Ray and Jacqueline MacGillivray, owners of the largest Earl Young house, enjoy the sweeping views of Lake Michigan.

"This is an enchanted place," says Jacqueline.



A sunburst pattern of ceiling beams, a fireplace constructed of Onaway quarry stone and a table made from a slice of black walnut give the MacGillivrays a dramatic-looking living room.

The Wallace home, just a dune away from Lake Michigan was a two-story, frame farmhouse before Young remodeled it.

"He turned it into a one-and-a-half-story, round stone house," says Wallace. "Earl Young loved stones. He left his mark on Charlevoix."

That trademark includes leaded glass salvaged from Chicago lumber barons' mansions, copper-tooled accents and magnificent fireplaces.

Wallace's living room has all three. Her copper-tooled fireplace is cut into a wall of diagonally-set, buff-colored Onaway quarry stone. A copper bowl, filled with dried bittersweet, accents the planter shelf above the fireplace.

In late morning, sunlight perfectly reproduces the pattern of the leaded glass window panes on the copper bowl.

Although Wallace had summered in Charlevoix as a child, she and her late husband didn't set out to buy an Earl Young home.

"We were just looking for housing. But we fell in love with the charming appearance. It's an easy home to live in -- cozy but you don't feel closed in," says Wallace, the mother of two grown daughters.

Three-foot thick stone walls keep the house cool in summer, warm in winter. The main floor has a kitchen, dining room, living room, master bedroom, two bathrooms and a den. The low-ceilinged upper story has two bedrooms, a dressing room and a bathroom.

It sounds straightforward, but with the round outer walls and Young's penchant for visual surprise, the interior room arrangement is anything but simple to describe. The traffic pattern swirls and eddies like waves on Lakeshore.

"Someone once asked me how many square feet we have. I haven't the foggiest. It would be impossible to measure," Wallace says.

Tourists often come to owners' doors

Kitchens were less important to Earl Young than fireplaces and roof lines. Wallace says remodeling her kitchen -- giving it three doorways and five windows -- was a challenge. She also hired a landscaper to transform the flat corner lot into a series of hillocks and decks.

"I've had tour buses stopping every day," says Wallace. "We needed some privacy."

But the changes have remained true to Earl Young's fanciful intent. When the cedar shakes began rotting, Wallace and a local roofer tracked down the old Upper Peninsula carver who had hand-cut the original shingles.

"The roofers took photos of each section of roof before they ripped off the old shingles, so they could reproduce the windswept look. That roof cost more than the house did," she says.

Through Shop of the Gulls, Wallace's local gift and apparel shop, she met Deborah Minier, a painter from Columbia City, Ind, and hired her for some trompe l'oeil effects. The dining room now boasts a faux cupboard complete with books by her family, such as Murphy's Law, by daughter Murphy. Painted grapevines twine around doorways.

Upstairs, the low ceilings and slanting walls have sprouted hollyhocks, lilies-of-the-valley, and a little bird on a nest. In daughter Rebecca's old bedroom, Wallace now enjoys a painted crabapple tree, just like the one the family planted outdoors after Rebecca's birth. Another bedroom wall sports a drinking fountain.

"My decorating is personal, eccentric," says Wallace. "These walls call out for whimsy."



In an upstairs bedroom at Jeannine Wallace's house, a painted crabapple tree

decorates the low ceiling and slanting walls.

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are more angular than many
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Whimsy is present, but not as important to Ray and Jacqueline McGillivray, now in their late 60s. They bought their sprawling villa overlooking Lake Michigan in 1985 after Ray retired from his car dealership in Vassar, a thumb area town.

"We're cold weather buffs and wanted to live near ski slopes," says Jacqueline. "We'd never heard of Earl Young. Basically, we were looking for a house that was on the water, with a view and near town."

They've learned a lot about Earl Young since then, especially after one of the men who helped build the house knocked on the door and asked to show his wife around.

For example Young took great pride in designing each house according to its site.

*Earl Young took pride
in using a site to dictate
the design of the house*

"The builder told us that Earl Young walked around the lot, faced Lake Michigan and said, 'I want to see one-third sky, one third water and one-third grass. The fireplace will go behind me,'" Ray says.

That fireplace and grand picture windows -- which really do show Young's desired proportions of sky, water and grass -- dominate the MacGillivray living room.

From a copper-tooled fireplace screen painted with two green pine trees and inlaid with a copper spider, limestone radiates out in a sunburst pattern. The same pattern is reflected in nine massive ceiling beams. The beams extend through the outer wall over a patio.

Below the interior beams stands a low table. It was sliced from a gigantic black walnut tree, polished, and set on wrought iron legs. The table, a local antique shop find, was made by Earl Young. One of his daughters told the MacGillivrays that the table used to stand before Young's own picture window.

Yellow neon lights, hidden above the radiating ceiling beams, bounce off the table and transform the room at night. "We often wonder whether the patterns are supposed to suggest sunbeams or spider webs," Jacqueline muses.

It's a favorite subject when their five grown children, grandchildren and assorted in-laws gather around the fire after a day on the ski slopes.

"Even when 40-mile-an-hour winds whip Lake Michigan to a froth, the foot-thick walls keep us warm," Ray says.

Except for rounded corners in the back bedrooms, the lines of the MacGillivray home are more angular than many Earl Young creations. The dining room, kitchen and entry area flank the center of the house, facing the street.

The fireplace is in the very center of the house. The living room spans the central area and faces Lake Michigan. Two bedrooms and bathrooms make up each side of the house.

From Park Avenue, the house looks even bigger than it is. The MacGillivrays say that previous owners added a breezeway and a garage.

When the blinds are open, passersby can see from the street through the sets of picture windows to sailboats on Lake Michigan.

At night the MacGillivrays like to stand by an outdoor planter so they can see four sunsets -- the live sunset, plus three more reflected in the living room picture window and leaded glass windows of the back bedrooms.

"I love taking pictures, and after eight years I still see new shadows," Jacqueline says.



Curving walls are part of a traffic pattern that swirls and eddies like waves on the lakeshore.

IF YOU GO

Earl Young Tour

Getting there: You can find most of the places yourself by taking Bridge Street to the Pine River Channel, which connects Round Lake to Lake Michigan. (Round Lake empties on the other end into beautiful Lake Charlevoix.)

Handy guides: Charlevoix Chamber of Commerce offers a free brochure and map of Earl Young creations. It includes 26 homes and three businesses. The Chamber is at 408 E. Bridge Street (U.S. 31).

Young helped design three businesses on the north side of the channel: The Weathervane (Inn) Restaurant, The Weathervane Terrace Hotel, and The Lodge.

Immediately south of the channel, take Park Avenue west and south to see a triangular block full of Earl Young homes. Continue south on Park Avenue to Eastern Road, which will take you into Boulder Park, a development where Young built his first one-of-a-kind stone cottages.

Transportation: Charlevoix is compact enough so

that you can walk, bike, or drive past these homes. The self guided tour is especially nice during the color season - usually the first three weeks of October.



The 'Mushroom House,' above, owned by Jeanine Wallace, features round outer walls.

PHOTOS / STEVEN HUYSER-HONIG