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DO GNOMES LIVE HERE?

Life by the hearth never dull in builder Earl Young's fanciful stone abodes

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Earl Young's houses sport leaded glass salvaged from Chicago lumber barons' mansions, copper-tooled accents and magnificent fireplaces.

(NEWS BUREAU PHOTO)

CHARLEVOIX - 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.

Stone homes delight today's owners

"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 50s, 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 the University of Michigan architecture school.

The whimsically designed houses look somewhat like a village of the Smurfs, a one-time popular cartoon show. 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.

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."

Wallace's living room has a copper-tooled fireplace cut into a wall of diagonally set, buff-colored Onaway quarry stone. A copper bowl, filled with dried bittersweet, accents the 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 straight-forward enough, 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 the lake shore.

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

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.

Through Shop of the Gulls, her local gift and apparel shop, Wallace 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 and painted grapevines twining around doorways.

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

Whimsey is present, but not as important to Ray and Jacqueline McGillivray, who are in their late 60s. They bought their sprawling villa overlooking Lake Michigan in 1985.

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

"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,'" says Ray.

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 it once stood 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.

Seeing Earl Young's legacy

You can find most of the places yourself by taking Bridge Street to the Pine River Channel, which connects Round Lake to Lake Michigan. 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.

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).



Unusual touches to the Ray and Jacqueline MacGilvray home include a wavy cedar shake roof and a cartoonstyle chimney, signatures of creator Earl Young. (NEWS BUREAU PHOTO)