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Oddball on the wrecking crew

In Prairie's mansions, young collector found—and kept—the Avenue's soul

By MICAH MAIDENBERG
Editor

Jack Simmerling's co-workers on the wrecking crews hired in the 1950s and '60s to tear down mansions on Prairie Avenue weren't much interested in artifacts the kid among them recovered from those buildings.

Simmerling once found a Tiffany floor lamp and loaded it on a truck belonging to Chester Good, the wrecker from Robbins, Ill., who got Simmerling his job on the street and sometimes ferried him and his finds to and from the block. Good advised him to take lead pipe if anything. That, at least, could be sold to a junk dealer for profit.

"I saw a great deal of beauty and a lot of history," he said. "I think everyone else failed to see the beauty."

Prairie Avenue, tucked into the southeast corner of what is now called the South Loop, was once home to the city's wealthiest and most powerful industrial and commercial tycoons, their families and servants. They built elaborate homes, gilded on the outside in a variety of architectural styles and full of finery on the inside.



Jack Simmerling is proud he had the chance to comb the crumbling mansions of Prairie Avenue.
FRANK PINC/Staff Photographer



A watercolor by Jack Simmerling of a Prairie Ave. mansion.

Party like it's 1893

The Festival on Prairie Avenue is scheduled for Saturday, Sept. 6, from noon to 6 p.m. at Prairie and 18th. Organized by the Prairie District

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The street had fallen in disrepair by the time Simmerling arrived in the '50s, and was pockmarked with parking lots. But like Chicago photographer and preservationist Richard Nickel's obsession with Louis Sullivan buildings in the Loop, Simmerling grew enamored with the Prairie Avenue homes, even as they crumbled and everyone else seemed indifferent-or even happy-to see them go.

Neighborhood Alliance, the festival commemorates the historic area and mimics a party thrown in 1978 in honor of the new historic district designation. That party-and this one-were organized around an 1893 World's Fair theme, as many of the organizers of that seminal Chicago moment lived on Prairie Avenue.

Jack Simmerling is expected to be there on Saturday, Sept. 6, showing painting and artifacts, and organizers are also promising an organ grinder-with Mr. Monk, the monkey who visited the street for the party 30 years ago-as well as a "menagerie of exotic animals," food, arts and crafts and other activities.

There is a \$10 suggested donation for adults, and \$5 for children 2-12. E-mail the PDNA at pdna.chicago@gmail.com for more information.

He was a proud defender of the Victorian stylings of Prairie Avenue during college, when architectural trends turned resolutely toward modernism, and Prairie Avenue represented, according to one of his professors, "abysmal taste."

"For many years, I thought I was the only one who cared. And I probably was," he said.

Simmerling first arrived on Prairie Avenue at age 15, after his friend Good offered him a job on the demolition team.

Later, Good would call Simmerling with tips about when buildings were being torn down. Once a building was slated for demolition, it wasn't long for the world, Simmerling said. Insurance worries ensured those buildings came down fast.

Besides scavenging items from the homes, Simmerling befriended some of the remaining residents of Prairie Avenue while working with the crews. Ms. Gibson, for example, at 217 E. Cullerton, served oyster stew on mismatched plates and flatware. Each cup or plate in a different style represented a unique set, and she used bits from her vast collection so she wouldn't forget what she owned.

R.W. Eyster, who lived at 2003-2005 S. Prairie, invited Simmerling into his home, which was filled with treasures from all over the world, Simmerling said, like cigar boxes filled with unpolished star sapphires from India.

"I'd go up, knock on the door and say, 'Oh the house is so beautiful, can I come in?' Who was going to turn down a kid?" Simmerling said.

In his home in the Morgan Park neighborhood, Simmerling displays what he was able to save

during his time on Prairie Avenue, which ended in the 1970s as his family grew and he worked as a teacher and gallery owner in Chicago's Beverly neighborhood.

There are decorative pieces from the mantel of Max Meyer's fireplace at 2009 S. Prairie, a wrought-iron basket culled from a solarium, a wooden sideboard with Columbus' face in its center.

He found other ways to preserve Prairie Avenue's history. Dozens of his paintings of the street hang on the walls in an upstairs room of his home. He also took photographs, built cardboard models of the homes and clipped articles about the area from newspapers.

Even as Simmerling collected what he could, other local preservationists were spurred to start saving more of Prairie Avenue-and other historic areas-from the wrecking ball.

In 1966, the owners of the Glessner House, the imposing Romanesque-style home at 18th and Prairie, considered demolition. A group of Chicago architects stepped in to buy and save the building, inaugurating what is now known as the Chicago Architecture Foundation. According to a history of the organization by Marian DePres, one of its founding activists, discussions about creating a historic district on Prairie Avenue officially started in the summer of 1970.

DePres and Ruth Moore Garbe, a Sun-Times reporter, were two of the leaders in pushing for the district, which was officially designated in December 1979.

Today, Prairie Avenue is a mixture of a few remaining historic buildings, anchored by Glessner House and Kimball House on either side of Prairie and 18th, and new infill housing farther down the block.

Simmerling said he didn't see the changes coming in the midst of the area's midcentury decay. But he's glad they've arrived-though it's too late, he says, for many of the old homes.

"I'm so happy with what Prairie Avenue is now," he said. "In the 1950s, I thought this was my own private sorrow."

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