

This Old House

**A Presentation to the Pike County Historical Society
by Ted Jackson
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It starts with a little honky-tonk. Eight bars of intro, cue the vocals, and this husky voice that could have only belonged to Rosemary Clooney has another hit: in 1954, The Old House was Top Ten for 17 weeks.

This old house once knew his children,
This old house once knew his wife,
This old house was home and comfort
As they fought the storms of life.
This old house once rang with laughter,
This old house heard many shouts,
Now he trembles in the darkness
When the lightning walks about....

This Old House on Champ Clark Drive, now a National Historic Landmark site, has stories of its own to tell. If the foundation stones, if the walls of the office and the parlor, if the balustrades and bargeboards could talk, they would have a great story to tell.

Notwithstanding the political biography of Champ Clark,... his insatiable appetite for stump speaking and his popularity on the Chautauqua circuits,... his pivotal and partisan role in the Rules Reform of 1910, arguably the most important debate ever joined in the House of Representatives,... and his remarkable service as Speaker of the House,... the office and the library of This Old House would tell stories to make today's political discourse—sophomoric as it is—pale by comparison.

Notwithstanding the stand-alone accomplishments of his wife, Genevieve,... her commitments to women's suffrage and civil rights,... her return to Bowling Green as a sudden widow,... her literary club and The Honeyshuck Society,... the parlor walls of This Old House alone would fill a library with their stories.

Notwithstanding the remarkable records of the two children who were raised here, wandering the streets of Bowling Green; son Bennett was a co-founder of the American Legion, and daughter Genevieve was one of the first women to run for Congress after the ratification of the 19th Amendment.

Notwithstanding all the other stories they would tell if the walls could talk, This Old House—The Champ Clark House—has a story of its own.

In February of 1853, John G. Campbell died in Bowling Green, without leaving any Last Will and Testament.

In that same February of 1853, for a point of reference, a three-year-old boy in Kentucky, named James Beauchamp Clark, would be soon to register his earliest childhood memory: that being, traumatically, of his mother's funeral.

Back to Mr. Campbell, who died without a Will. On the 4th of April, 1859—six years later and to settle John Campbell's estate for his widow, Mary, and their three children, James, Henry and Robert—the Sheriff of Pike County, Masten H. Arthur, executed the order of Thomas J. C. Fagg, Judge of the Probate Court, and before the court house door in the village of Bowling Green, did sell, "by public outcry and auction," two city blocks, undeveloped,... and four slaves, well developed,... (if the price they fetched, the land and the slaves respectively, can be a fair indication). The two city blocks, numbered 19 and 36 in the original plat of Bowling Green,... sold as one lot for \$350.00. The four slaves, Hampton, Harrison (who was called Whack), Caroline, and Anderson,... sold as four lots separately for a total of \$3,525.00.

In January of 1883 – 24 years later – and also to settle her husband's estate,... Mary Penn (also known as Margaret), widow of John E. Penn (for those of you living on or in the vicinity of Penn Street in Bowling Green), sold Block No. 36 to one Ezra Kirkland (with his wife, Esther),... for an amount of \$800.00.

In January of 1883, for a point of reference, James Beauchamp Clark, then Champ Clark – Deputy Prosecuting Attorney for the County of Pike – and Genevieve, his bride of just 13 months, were living in a four-room brick cottage eight blocks west on Main Street in Bowling Green, which some of you will recall as Georgia Bridge's house.

In 1888, Ezra Kirkland built a house on his Block No. 36, sitting astride the two middle lots of four on the south side of the block, just beyond Spring Hollow, facing south on to what was The Cyrene Road (out of Bowling Green),... later College Street,... now Champ Clark Drive.

Ezra Kirkland's house on the east edge of town, along The Cyrene Road, was just pretty darn nice for Bowling Green, surrounded by cornfields and cow pastures, garden plots,... and a grand stand of messy locust trees. The last house on the way out of town, it was one mighty swell house for sure.

The honey locust tree, growing to 70 feet with a lacy foliage that lets the grass grow in its shade, bears pungent brown seed pods that resemble a twisted leather strap, sometimes in some places by some people called honeysucks.

In 1888, for a point of reference, while Kirkland was building his house, Champ Clark, ... still living with Genevieve in that four-room brick cottage, and having suffered the infant deaths of their first two children (Little Champ and Anne Hamilton), ...ran for and was elected to a seat in the Missouri State Assembly, the seat currently held by State Representative Terry Witte.

Ezra Kirkland's house was a straightforward frame construction: 2x4s on 16-inch centers, of white oak timbers, floor joists, ceiling rafters and studs, locally milled, and pine flooring, lap siding and cedar shakes, shipped up the Mississippi River by packet, off-loaded on the wharves in Louisiana, and hauled either by private draymen or by train on the Chicago & Alton Railroad up to Bowling Green, there to be built up on a foundation of locally quarried limestone.

This limestone, while it had the benefits of being abundant, readily available, and cheap, had the disadvantage of being fairly porous,... and acting like a wick (!),... drawing moisture out of the ground, wicking it up into the wood, so your house was damp,...all the time. It's harder to heat in the wintertime,... and it smells musty in the summertime,... so, if you were away for any length of time, you would want your neighbor or a housekeeper to open the house up and air it out for a couple of days before you came back home.

(As custodians of this National Historic Landmark, the Board of Directors has a dilemma. While the mold and mildew are persistent challenge to our obligations to preserve the house and the collections,... they are, after all, historically authentic(!), as much a part of the house's character as the wrap-around porch and the porcelain doorknobs.)

Ezra Kirkland's house was a just a nice big house on the edge of a small town. It had a cellar,... that was damp! It had a parlor,... a general living room — or a large foyer — as the occasion for one or the other presented itself, a library, a dining room, and a kitchen on the main floor. It had four bedrooms upstairs, three of them not-so-private. There were a half dozen fire places. It had an outhouse. And you pumped your water from a cistern.

Ezra Kirkland's house, still all in all, was just about as good as it got in Bowling Green. Oh, sure, there were a half dozen homes that were nicer, but not many, and not much. It wouldn't have made the Tour of Homes in Louisiana, but for Bowling Green, This Old House was about as good as it got.

(Ezra Kirkland's new house, facing south onto The Cyrene Road, has a lesson to teach about the economic climate in Bowling Green, and the political climate ten miles away from The River, where the woods finally gave way to the farm lands: why are there mansions on Third Street and Georgia Street in Louisiana,... but not so on the gravel road to Cyrene in Bowling Green?

(While, just ten miles away, Louisiana (MO) gave rise to a flourishing merchant class of River City Aristocrats,... men of commerce, enterprise, and wealth,... men who owned the steamboats, and the wharves, and the warehouses, and the trading floors, and the retail stores—and who took a cut at every level of exchange, and built their mansions on Georgia Street—, in Bowling Green on the other hand, the agricultural base distributed the wealth rather more democratically, doing without a local aristocracy in favor of the foundations of The American Middle Class.)

(Champ Clark would want me to interject here, albeit as an editorial opinion for which there is no charge and because it is another lesson to learn from This Old House, that you could not — indeed cannot — have a vital democracy without a thriving middle class, and you cannot have a thriving middle class when there is a disproportionate consignment of wealth at the top end.)

In December of 1898, Ezra Kirkland's house and the two lots it sits on, and the two lots adjoining behind, were purchased by Champ and Genevieve Clark.

In December of 1898, for a point of reference, Champ Clark had just been re-elected to his third term of what would be thirteen terms in the United States House of Representatives. He was an important voice for The Minority in Congress, and he was extremely popular among his 9th District voters, and we can safely suppose that, in a country and a congress gone terribly Republican, this Democratic congressman from a True to Blue Missouri, just as safely supposed

it was time to move uptown.. Besides, he had two kids, ages 10 and 6, and no doubt needed bigger digs than the four-room brick cottage on West Main Street.

In January of 1899, the papers were signed in Bowling Green, Missouri, and Washington, D. C., and Ezra Kirkland's ten-year-old house on the edge of town was recorded at the County Court House as then belonging to Genevieve Clark(!)

Which is yet another lesson to learn from This Old House, lest we miss it and move on too quickly. Does anybody want to take a crack at this one? (Your guesses are as good as mine.) Why, do you suppose,... they put the house in her name?)

Now that the Clarks owned This Old House, which really wasn't an old house at all, at least so far as our story has taken us so far, let's talk a little more about the house, and some of its defining features:

Outside,....

it has an L- shaped floor plan, and an (almost!) no-nonsense exterior, save for a wrap-around porch, turned wooden balustrades, access to the roof of the porch,... as a second story veranda,... the jig-saw "bargeboards" (also called "vergeboards") in the gables, built-in copper-lined rain gutters across the front of the house, but with ordinary gutters and downspouts on the sides less visible(!), two stained glass windows,... one of which has disappeared,... beveled-glass in the several front doors,... at least three,... wood shutters,... and, still outside,... the heavy cast iron fence.

And inside,...

no grand staircase, that's for sure,... nobody makes a fancy entrance for dinner nor retires for the night gracefully,... but there is some fairly fancy woodwork, if not footwork: the wheat and target patterns at the corners of the doorways, the molding,... the baseboards,... but the doorknobs are metal, ceramic at best, not glass,....

Any student of residential architecture—or anybody that wants to show-off their computer search and rescue skills with re: historical preservation — would have a proper name for this style of house: *Folk Victorian, with [modest] Carpenter Gothic features*, but it has seemed to me that it would be more accurately described as *Elegance-on-the-Cheap!*,... for, you see, there is nothing that I've cataloged above that wasn't available out of the catalog of Sears, Roebuck, and Co. Before there was Amazon.com there was mail-order, and before there was UPS and its brown trucks there was Wells Fargo and their signature maroon and gold delivery wagons.

(And that's another lesson from this old house, that in 1898, in Bowling Green, Missouri, you didn't have to live on Georgia Street to have a pretty fancy house. And that, Champ and Genevieve Clark would want me to say, is a pretty democratic idea.)

By the way, and I should point out here, the Clarks didn't ever live in This Old House full-time—nor did they ever intend to! — but rather moved back and forth as the obligations of his office determined, from Bowling Green to Washington, back to Bowling Green, confirming This

Old House (not old at all at the time!) as their Missouri residence, the unofficial Ninth District Democratic Headquarters, Champ's law office, and his biennial re-election campaign tent!

Sometime in the first years that they owned the house, Champ and Genevieve made at least two major additions. In 1902, they traded in the chamber pots for indoor plumbing, adding a two story addition to the inside corner — the elbow of the “L”— to put a bathroom upstairs, and enlarge a cloak-room down. And, probably at that same time, the original L-shaped floor plan became a U-shaped, with the single story addition of an office to accommodate Clark's law practice, and a “stack-room” to accommodate his private library, which was considerable. At the time of his death twenty years later, it was one of the largest personal libraries in the State of Missouri with well over 3200 volumes.

The Clarks called their home *Honeysluck*, variously one word or two, after the leather-strap seed pods of the locust trees that covered the grounds, and they were as at home here as they were in Washington. Over the next twenty years — just as the chamber pots gave way to indoor plumbing — so oil lamps gave way to gas/electric combination fixtures and, eventually, to electric lights altogether. Telephones were provided by a private phone company. No less than seven fireplaces gave way to a single coal-stoked furnace in the cellar. And in the kitchen, the cistern pump was replaced by cast iron faucets, the wood burning cook stove with its nickel trim was replaced by a white enameled electric range, and the ice box made way for something likewise more modern!

Champ Clark died in 1921. Crushed, devastated by the sudden death of the only grandchild he would ever know, Clark was an ineffective and dispirited candidate for reelection in 1920, and he died in Washington two days before the end of what would have been his last term in office. His funeral was in Bowling Green, and as the whole of the Ninth District had come to *Honeysluck* for annual open houses, and as all Missouri had been invited to their daughter's wedding, so 12,000 people came to Bowling Green for the funeral, the most intimate of which finding their way to This Old House across Spring Hollow on the gravel road to Cyrene.

Genevieve stayed on then — ironic, that in This Old House with ownership once recorded in her name alone, she only lived here full time as a widow — reaching the infirmities of old age in 1935, crossing the bar in 1937.

And then This Old House entered a new and remarkable chapter in its life.

The children, Bennett and Genevieve, grown, married, established elsewhere, after their mother's death took very little out of the house, a few mementos, books, the artifacts of childhood in Bowling Green. The plumbing was drained, shades were drawn and sheets draped over the furniture, the cellar door was locked and the keys were left with a trusted neighbor.

In the late spring of 1944, This Old House having apparently been unoccupied for eight years, Bennett and Genevieve and Genevieve's husband James sold the house — and all the remaining furnishings — to long-time friends of the Clark family, Kenneth Meek and his wife Juanita. Mr. Meek was a Bowling Green businessman, second generation owner of The Blue Oak Axe Handle Company. The Meeks had a home on North Main Cross Street, and briefly entertained the idea of restoring This Old House and moving into *Honeysluck* as a single family home. But the “best laid plans of mice and men *gang aft agley*.”

In 1941, the War Department contracted with the Hercules Powder Company of Wilmington, Delaware, to build and operate a chemical plant producing weapons-grade anhydrous ammonia, to be located along the Mississippi river in Pike County, Missouri. On the fast track, Hercules brought their own workforce from Delaware to build and run the plant. Housing for these workers was at a premium. Every manner of grand mansion within sixty miles became a boarding home, with the landladies packing lunch pails for her tenants. As these workers found rooms throughout the area, the C. B. & Q. railroad put extra trains into service to shuttle workers to the plant from Hannibal and as far away as Quincy. Whatever dreams and designs the Meeks might have had for *Honeyshuck* quickly gave way to a groundswell of patriotism to provide housing for the workers at the war plant.

(There is still another lesson to learn from the stories these walls might tell — if the walls could talk — about how we measure and mark our own and one another's patriotism at any given moment, here cobbling together a boarding house at one time from a property that would survive —but just barely — to become a National Historic Landmark at another.)

The Meeks moved into their recently purchased house with hammers in hand and purpose in mind. Living on one side and working on the other, they divided This Old House into four apartments, two and three rooms at a time. Each would have its own kitchen and bath, the upstairs units with outside entrances and awkward wooden stairways, even as it all meant the end for *Honeyshuck* as the Clark's historic home.

In the spring of 1945, confirming that the Clark family had no interest in the personal property, the Meeks sold those furnishings at auction: tables and chairs, lamps and loveseats, Genevieve's bluebird china and Champ's roll-top desk, their travel trunks and household utensils.

Finishing the work, sweeping up the sawdust, and letting the rooms, the Meeks moved back to their home on North Main Cross. Yet then within a year-and-a-half, the war plant suspended production, the workforce moved back to Delaware, and the apartment house on what was then called College Street in Bowling Green began the second to the last chapter of its life, living out its usefulness as a rental property.

The first steady tenants were young families, war wives and children. It became a boarding home for single men. It took a turn as a sort of nursing home before such places were called nursing homes.

In the mid-1950s, the Meeks tried with some determination to find a buyer for This Old House, one with the interest and the resources to restore *Honeyshuck* to its place in history. They approached the matter with a couple they knew whose son was a young attorney in Troy, a fellow by the name of Bill Hungate. But there were no takers. In 1957, This Old House was sold to Bill and Pat Robinson as an income property. The Robinson's own home was behind *Honeyshuck*, on two lots that had been part of the Clark's original purchase. By the late 1960s, the costs of maintenance and repair had become prohibitive and once again the utilities were shut off, the shades drawn, and the doors bolted. The rats moved in and with the rats came rack and ruin.

In the first term of the 93rd Congress (1973), the members of the House of Representatives found themselves mired in some procedural mud hole. Congressman Matsunaga (D-Hawaii)

pulled his colleagues out of the pit as he quoted at length a speech once delivered to the House by Champ Clark! Struck at once by the staying power of Clark's political legacy, Congressman Bill Hungate — from Bowling Green and Missouri's 9th District — left the chamber and on a whim, which was the way Bill did a lot of things, called a friend in Bowling Green, Jim Millan. Finding from Millan that the Clark's house was still standing and indeed might be for sale, Hungate set in motion first his own purchase of the property, and then its transfer to a non-profit corporation he called *Champ Clark Honey Shuck Restoration, Inc.* He later and with good humor regretted naming the corporation *Champ Clark Honey Shuck Restoration, Inc.*: "It's too long for a serious donor to write on a check!"

On July 7, 1973, as the community marked its own sesquicentennial, The Hon. Carl Albert, Speaker of the House of Representatives, addressed the people of Bowling Green, albeit with excusable hyperbole, dedicating the beginning of the work to restore The Champ Clark House:

"Thanks to your very distinguished Congressman, the Honorable William L. Hungate, "Honeyshuck," Bowling Green, Missouri, tonight becomes a national shrine. The city that gave Champ Clark to America now joins one of his successors, Bill Hungate, in preserving important vestiges of the home and community life of this twentieth century giant. By this action, you honor the memory of a man who in his life so highly honored you.

This shrine brings closer the graphic view of the life and works of a Missouri statesman who literally changed the course of American history. In generations to come, Honeyshuck will join Mount Vernon and Monticello as a source of inspiration to all who are devoted to the American way of life."