

Miracle on 8th Street

*How one Wilmette family learned to time travel,
from their dining room into the kitchen.*

by Sherry Thomas



REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION - QUINTESSENTIAL MEDIA GROUP - COPYRIGHT © 2011



*I*magine you're sitting down at the house on 8th Street with one of Debra Behles' treasured stereoscopes, a 19th-century "miracle" contraption that opens the mind's eye to a Victorian third dimension, that slightly altered view of all that could be, or was, or might be emerging in your dreams. Held in your hand, the stereograph card itself is a peculiar sight, slightly concave, with what appear to be twin photographs cut and glued, mounted side-by-side about 2.5 inches apart. Through the prismatic lens of a stereoscope viewer, however, these seemingly parallel images become one perfect scene in time.

Were this card a stereograph of that house — where we soon will take you — there would be a number of some sort and a "title" that might read: Treasured Home of Former Wilmette Village President Held in Fascination for its Voyage into the 21st Century.



The Behles family worked with Jeff Harting (FGH Architects) to create a kitchen of dreams. This new addition features professional-grade appliances and a large island topped with exotic granite. The pot rack, hanging in the skylight, was a must for these cooks. The kitchen adjoins a family room with an entrance to an upper-level terrace for family dining as well as a kitchen eating area. This cook space is a major change from the historic servants' kitchen that had existed in the home for nearly a century.



Debra Behles sitting with son Quinlan, husband Brian, and daughter Tierney, enjoy time in the new family room with a collection of antique stereoscopes. When the family is not working, traveling or playing, they love to be at home enjoying their renovated historic home.



Christmas ornaments from Debra's collection are displayed on the table in the cozy kitchen addition.

On one side of the card would be a photograph of Louis and Estella Pierson, the couple that built the grand brick home in 1906 as the stage for their civic activities. The back of the card might indicate that Louis had served as president of the nascent Village of Wilmette from 1898 to 1899, and served as Illinois State Representative from 1905 to 1913. Estella, who an early *Wilmette Life* article described as a “pioneer schoolteacher” in Iowa before she married her lawyer husband, would be the first woman trustee of Wilmette village government and a former president of the Woman’s Club of Wilmette. Together, they were movers and shakers of their time, and the home would be the site of meetings and gala parties alike.

The opposite side of the card is in gleaming color, some 100 years later. The back would tell how Evanston and downtown Chicago cosmetic dentist Dr. Brian Behles and his wife, Debra, bought the house in 2004 as a home for their family, which includes a son, daughter and a statuesque Dane named Bowie. It might say that the family hosts large neighborhood barbecues, spends quite a bit of time with friends in Maine, and how Debra, a devout collector, is fond of historic artifacts. Christmas ornaments, antique scales, wooden hat forms and stereoscopes are among her favorites. And yes, in this imaginary scenario there would be a stereoscopic device to view this scene, to take in

both eras, both stories, as one. But the man holding the stereoscope, perhaps handing you the cards, would have to be Jeff Harting, the architect hired by the Behles family to go back in time with them.



“THE CONDITION OF THE HOUSE, THE BRICK, WAS PERFECT,” explains Harting, president of FGH Architects. “But all the trim and exterior wood was covered in aluminum siding, and one of the big mysteries was we didn’t know what was underneath.”

The existing kitchen was serviceable enough, but it hadn’t been truly updated since the Pierson family’s servants used it a century ago. “Literally four walls of cabinets and no storage whatsoever,” Harting says. In the Piersons’ day, there was likely a small family dining room in the back and a formal dining room, which is still intact today. Servants or help would serve regular meals in the family dining area, reserving the grander room for guests or special events.

The Behles family does not have servants and actually prefers to do much of the food preparation together — teenagers Tierney and Quinlan included. So Harting’s job was to create not only a functional modern kitchen but to create a modern kitchen that functions for a family of foodies that love to cook.

“In planning the addition, they had the existing house, which was very dark, dramatic and historical, and that they love,” he explains. “With the new addition, they wanted something that fit with the house exterior, but also brought in their ideas of the time they spend in Maine on the interior.”

Looking at the newly expanded and renovated house from the exterior, you would be hard pressed to know where the 1906 home started and the 2010 addition ended. Step up through the garden on 8th Street, however, and you will see our make-believe stereoscope emerge.



AS A CONNOISSEUR OF ARTIFACTS, Debra Behles is fascinated by destiny and the not-so-accidental collisions in time of people, places and events. Was she meant to live in this house?

The year was 2004 when she and her husband took ownership, embarking on a modest makeover just to make the house functional for a busy family of four (not counting Bowie, the dog, or Lumpy, the cat). Soon after they moved in, a woman stopped by the house to tell them a story.

“She said my friend Chloe grew up here. We used to climb up

the brick at night.”

As it turned out, the mysterious woman was related to another Wilmette family whom the Behles’ had befriended 10 years earlier, the same family they had been spending Thanksgiving with in Maine for years. “We’ve become like their family,” she explains of their relationship with these former neighbors and friends. “We travel a lot with them.”

That woman and another stranger who stopped by with photographs one day have filled in some missing pieces of the home’s history, stories and observations that offer clues about the location of certain rooms, or how they functioned. One visitor, for example, told Debra that they believed the third floor of the house was once a ballroom. Though knowing the Pierson couple’s high level of civic involvement, it could have been designed for any number of public events, perhaps even village government gatherings.

During the first makeover, Debra found a 1914 calendar stuffed in a wall, a mini time capsule left behind by one of the Piersons or their servants. She still has it, preserved as a portal from one era into the next. Soon after that, she found Harting and began planning a transformation that would last for one year.

Work began in 2009 and soon after, Debra Behles began preparing



A Glimpse Back In Time

This photo of the home from the early 20th century, provided by the Wilmette Historical Society, shows a sense of what the home looked like when Louis and Estella Pierson lived there.

meals in a friend’s kitchen across the street and carrying them back to the existing formal dining room — sometimes through the snow.

“We essentially lived in the dining room with a little board we had to walk on to get down to the basement,” Debra adds, with a wink. “We called it the plank of death.”



THE KITCHEN IN THE RENOVATION WAS A BIG DEAL.

“We love sailing, and we love boating and we’re at the beach all the time. I also love to cook, my husband loves to cook and our kids cook. So we wanted the kitchen our friends have in Maine,” Debra explains, “but we wanted it to blend with the old house.”

Jeff Harting came in with a vision. He wanted to evoke the sky and the colors of natural sand. And since zoning restrictions limited a second- or third-floor addition, he imagined a skylight over the island. “We couldn’t do a second floor,” he says. “So what a wonderful opportunity for a skylight!”

Debra admits she hesitated at first.

“I said what’s this? I wanted a pot rack!” she recalls. “He said it’s a skylight, with a pot rack!”

And so it is, and so the light pours into the kitchen during all the seasons, through snow and rain and sun and clouds. The cabinetry is bright and cheery but still consistent with the style of the historic house. The appliances chosen were all professional grade, perfect for the family who cooks.

Adjoining the kitchen is a bright, airy family room that opens to



The new family room is located right off the kitchen. The urns and topiary shown here are courtesy of Chalet Nursery, which also does landscaping for the Behles family.

a terrace outside. “We really wanted a space where they can cook, get to a terrace and get to a family dining space,” Harting adds. “It’s very private in the family space given it’s a side street. The goal for us to make this work was to create an upper level space to eat and enjoy the view while using the lower terrace more for entertaining.”

Debra says the family couldn’t be more pleased with the outcome. “We interviewed so many architects. He got it.”



AND SO, THE TWO CENTURIES BECAME ONE.

The original, historic parts of the house on 8th Street remain preserved and pristine, down to the chandeliers, soaring fireplaces and a golden oak entryway that winds all the way to the third floor. Meanwhile, the newer portions of the home reflect another generation of Wilmette life, one that’s less about civic meetings and more



The Behles family cat, Lumpy, is caught walking from the past to the present. The dining room (on the left) now flows seamlessly to a butler pantry and the kitchen eating area.

about Trevian field hockey parties and casual holiday gatherings.

“With all our projects, we really want to be respectful of what we’re designing and adding,” says Harting, who received an award from the Village of Wilmette last year for a “sympathetic” addition to an historic home. “Everything on the exterior had to evolve from the materials that already existed.”

Which brings us back to the aluminum siding.

“We had a 50/50 chance that we would be able to pull this off and all the original materials would be there,” he adds. “Luckily the big day came when we tore off all the aluminum siding and all the original dentil molding and parapet details were still there, so then we knew what to build on with our final materials. We blended the old house with the new house, and were able to restore what was original to the house.”

Debra Behles says she and her family could not be more pleased.

“We’re a family who loves to be in our own house,” she explains.

“We like to be an open house, and we like to have people over.”

And though Debra’s not one for grand parties or grand gestures, she makes a few exceptions when it comes to food.

In the formal dining room, which is almost exactly the same as it was a century ago, she loves to host big breakfasts. Not fancy. Just delicious and evocative of all those mornings spent with friends vacationing in Maine or Jackson Hole, Wyo.

“You wake up in Maine and there’s pastries and fruit. So when our friends visit, I do that here, and we love it.”

On cardboard, in black and white, the scenes might appear to be more than 2.5 inches apart. But together, under one lens, the image is seamless, even if it’s only an optical illusion.

For more information about Jeff Harting and FGH Architects, go to www.fgharchitects.com. For more information about Wilmette history, go to www.wilmettehistory.org.

