



770 WEST HIGHLAND

Born in New York in 1823, Finla L. McClure came west with his father in 1846 and settled in Elgin. In 1849, he married Levantia Padelford, whose grandfather Manly had settled in James Gifford's original town plat in 1843. Levantia died approximately ten years after their marriage, leaving a young son, Charles V. In 1861, Finla married Fannie K. Wilder. They had one daughter, Bertha, before Fannie, too, died.

In addition to being a successful farmer, Finla was an active businessman. He built the first ice house in Elgin, was a leading milk dealer and shipper and, as general manager, brought the Elgin Packing Co. from the verge of bankruptcy to an industry second to only the watch factory. "A good, solid Republican," Finla also served as a town trustee and alderman.

Finla had this home built and moved in in 1891. A niece, Miss Linda Jenne, lived with him, but Finla spent his summers at Lake Geneva and his winters in Phoenix, where he died May 20, 1900. Among his other survivors were his son, Charles, who lived at 227 Villa, and his daughter, now Mrs. Bertha Bosworth of Oberlin Ohio. In June of 1900, Charles sold the Highland Avenue "homestead" to Willis Lyman Black, who was born in Elgin in 1855.

Willis father, Lyman Black, came to Elgin from Massachusetts in 1836 and for many years lived at 245 Villa, a mansion that unfortunately has been converted to a multi-unit apartment building. An excellent businessman, Lyman was one of the organizers of and served as director and vice-president of, both the Elgin City Banking Company and the First National Bank of Elgin.

Willis, the only surviving child of Lyman and Harriet Black, became vice-president and subsequently president of the First National Bank. He also went into partnership with A. H. Lowrie, whose mansion stood at 25 North Gifford Street. Their publishing firm, Lowrie & Black, owned two Elgin papers: the Daily-News and the Weekly Advocate. Willis held the position of publisher for 30 years.

In 1884, Willis married Etta D. Roe. They made their home at 237 Villa for several years, when they purchased the Highland Avenue property for \$15,000, "\$9,000 was cash and the balance the residence at 421-DuPage Street." Also in the notice of sale, which appeared in the Elgin Daily-News on June 4, 1900, was the fact that their new property had "210 feet frontage on Highland Avenue and 340 feet on McClure" as well as Willis Black's intent to "make some alterations in the property and . . . occupy it as a home." It served, however, as their home for only part of the year, for according to a 1903 article in Elgin Today, the Black's "spend their summers largely in their cottage in Elgin Camp, Lake Geneva."

Ownership of the house eventually passed to the Black's daughter, Mareta, who married William McCredie, the owner of the Bank of Huntley. The house thus remained in the Black family for about 80 years.

In September of 1983, 770 West Highland was purchased by the current owners, a young couple from the state of Washington who are determined to preserve this Elgin treasure.

The architect was W. W. Abell, the general contractor was Martin Bullard and the mason was Andrew Magnus for this house which was built in an asymmetrical plan on a massive scale in a late, SIMPLIFIED QUEEN ANNE style with varied roof forms and a square-cut shingle facade. The granite porch with its massive arched openings, however, is reminiscent of Romanesque Revival, another popular style in the 1890's. Note the exaggerated, unfluted Tuscan columns, the dentils on the roof, the repetitive modillions along the eaves, the incised detail in the tower, and the paired columns flanking the window in the peak of the primary gable. Note also that the polygonal turret above the roof changes to round at the porch and that the stone chimney changes to brick above the roof. On the west side of the house is a porte cochere, under which guests once stepped from horse-drawn carriages.

While chemically stripping the entire house by hand the current owners uncovered the original shades of the exterior and are repainting with them: tawny coral is the primary color; the trim is in shades of green, brown, abbey stone and blue.

Upon entering the home, note the ceramic mosaic floor in the vestibule. Initialed with the letter "B," it is one of Willis Black's "alterations" to the property. Throughout the home, the glass is stunning, but nowhere is it more so than in the entry. After passing through the double set of bevelled, leaded glass doors into the foyer, note the bevelled glass on the partially opened pocket door leading into the dining room. Note also the stained glass window at the vestibule door and on the landing of the staircase.

As is the case in the parlours of the first floor, the wall covering in the foyer is a Parisian tapestry, which is dated. Equally impressive are the onion-shaped wood column capitals of the main staircase. Here, as well as throughout the house, are original sconces for both electric and gas jets.

Note also the variety of patterns and woods in the inlaid parquetry banding and parquet floors. The impressive woodwork, including the fireplace mantles and the dining room buffet and built-in china cabinet, provide a symphony of variations and were done by a German woodcarver whom Willis Black employed for over a year to make the home more habitable. Note that the vines carved into the china cabinet match with the vines in the mural. Done in oils, this mural depicts a day in the country: starting at sunrise, it continues around the dining room, ending at sunset. Unfortunately, no longer in the home is a dining room table that was carved to match the rest of the pieces in the room.

Off the kitchen is a breakfast room with glassed fronted cabinetry. The house contains six bathrooms with original plumbing and five fireplaces. Although not open for viewing today, there is a billiards room on the third floor that contains an 1890's pool table.

After exiting the house, walk around to the back and note the small outhouse, a facility for guests when they were outside. When repairing the carriage house roof, the current owners found a number of pornographic glass plates of the 1893 World's Fair stuck into the eaves. Apparently the men who built the carriage house had "built" them into the roof for their viewing pleasure!

The grounds of the property are very much as they were when the Black's lived there. In fact, behind the grape arbor is an unmowed patch of lawn. It is an original tulip bed the owners are trying to "revive." Of the octagonal gazebo that once graced the property, however, only the steps leading down to it remain.