

Time Tracs by Jim Ingram

(This is the first column on Sibley Hall.)

This house at 154 Grove Street, Lake Orion was built in 1904 by Fredrick M. Sibley, a prominent Detroit lumber dealer.

It was shown by the Orion Historical Society in its Lake Orion Lakeside Heritage Tour in 1998. It was described in that tour book as a large Greek Revival style cottage.

There is a Palladian style front facade with Italinate influence in the trim. The columns are composite of Ionic and Corinthian design.

The Sept. 3, 1905 issue of the "Detroit News" described the Sibley summer home on Lake Orion as "very spacious and one of the finest."

In spring 2001, the Orion Area Chamber of Commerce received a letter from Mary Stewart Miles with a picture of Sibley Hall. She was inquiring about the status of this house.

This resulted in myself and Marie English, curator of the Northeast Oakland Historical Museum,, doing an oral history with Mary, her sister Elizabeth Stewart Sanford and three of their daughters.

These ladies visited Lake Orion this past June for two days. They toured the grounds of their former home and took a cruise on the lake.

The following are Mary's and Elizabeth's reminiscences of Lake Orion when their family lived here from 1918 to 1926.

First a few words about the Stewart family. Robert and Nancy Stewart purchased Sibley Hall from the Sibley family in 1918. They had two young daughters, Elizabeth and Mary.

Mr. Stewart had graduated from Phillips-Exiter Academy and Princeton. He was an electrical engineer with an office in Detroit and over the carriage house in Lake Orion.

They renamed Sibley Hall, Bowdon Hall, after the home of friends in England where Robert and Nancy had been married.

The Stewarts winterized Bowdon Hall and lived there year round in 1918. They installed a furnace in



The exterior of the house today looks much as it did back in the early 1900s.

the basement with heating ducts to the first floor only/

It was fired by coal and wood. The coal would be shoveled from the coal truck to the coal chute and then down to the basement coal bin. The wood was stored under the veranda which could be accessed from the basement.

There was a huge stone fireplace in the middle of the large living room enclosed by walls on both sides with a large chimney of brick that rose thru the second floor. Mary and Elizabeth said they were always warm in the winter, even in the bedrooms.

The exterior of the house appears today much as it did when built in 1904. The first and second floor verandas are present with their original columns and trim.

The carriage house remains at the rear of the

property. The original boathouse on the west lakeshore has been torn down.

When the Stewarts owned the property, there was a tennis court and rose garden adjacent to the carriage house.

At the extreme rear of the property, near Lake Street, was a pond which Elizabeth said was full of snapping turtles and surrounded by sassafras trees.

A forest of brush willows and nettles grew on the point. There were many oak and pine trees on the property, but at a fraction of the size they are today.

This was garbage disposal in Orion in the teens and 1920s. The Stewarts dug a pit on their property, threw the garbage into it and put a layer of dirt on top. This layering continued until the pit was filled. At that point they dug another pit. It should be very rich soil by now.