

THE LARCHES, the Allan Pinkerton House, near Onarga, "has given rise to more conjectures and legends than any other dwelling in the State", says John Drury in his 1949 book, "Old Illinois Houses".

THE MYSTERY HOUSE NEAR ONARGA

For years we have heard stories of a house near Onarga; built and owned by a man named Pinkerton, head of a 19th Century detective and secret service organization, that operated all over the world - It was the week end "whoopie house" of a wealthy Chicago man where he entertained his friends - It was the scene of horse races, shooting matches, and drinking parties - It was the front for one of the largest stations on the Underground Railway spiriting fugitive negroes from the South to Canada - It was the site for covert activities ranging from national political intrigue to secret conferences with people of the underworld - It was so well guarded that no one could approach it without challenge - It was connected by a tunnel to the Illinois Central Railroad and trains stopped there without warning, then resumed their journeys without explanation. These are just samples of the strange and curious tales of the house north of Onarga.

THE HOUSE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

The first time the house was pointed out to us was from an Illinois Central train. Looking west across a barren wintry landscape was an unkempt frame house with a few storm damaged trees, a large ramshackle barn, run-down outbuildings, all in a sea of mud - and, the stumps. Everywhere - white, weatherwasted, like the stones of an unkempt cemetery. Later we drove by and found the place occupied by a family with many children, pigs and chickens under the remains of the veranda - no signs of recent paint - windows ajar or gone - and more stumps. An unfriendly dog warned us to keep moving. How could this ruin ever have been "The Villa" or "The Larches" built and loved by a man famous in his day, and with a name still highly respected.

THE LARCHES, ITS BUILDINGS AND GROUNDS

Allan Pinkerton of Chicago, bought 254 acres of land near Onarga from the Illinois Central Railroad in 1864. He suffered a severe "stroke" in 1869 and spent two years in a bitter fight to regain his strength, speech, and mobility. In that time he made the plans for a country estate on his land, started the planting, and built the house in 1873. Descriptions of his estate can be pieced together from the book by Mr. Drury and the recent book by James D. Horan, "The Pinkertons". They said: "He created a replica of a gentleman's estate he had known as a boy in Scotland. The larch trees, 85,000 of them, had been imported from Scotland, and were set in orderly rows along the drives and grounds. Thousands of flowers were planted. The house, a story and a half high, with a windowed cupola on the roof, had a wide central hall with four rooms on each side, living and bedroom. There was a fish pond, a swimming pool, a race track, numerous outbuildings including greenhouses, dog kennels, and a tremendous barn where he kept forty to fifty riding horses. There was even a small cemetery for this favorite dogs and horses. Especially interesting was "The Snuggery" a wine cellar and entertainment room connected to the main house by a tunnel. Opening off this tunnel were the milk house, the ice house, the root cellar, and entries to the barns and outbuildings. He brought an artist from Scotland who decorated the walls of "The Villa" with scenes from Mr. Pinkerton's Civil War experiences with Lincoln, McClellan, Grant, and Sherman, and covered the walls of "The Snuggery" with scenes from his native Scotland.

The descriptions of the entertaining done at The Villa would match the quality of the best, and the list of guests entertained there read like the Who's Who of the 19th century. Mr. Horan says, "Finally, the Villa was finished. Thousands of larch trees had been planted. The famous series of oils gleamed in the soft light of the great chandeliers. There were footmen in livery, uniformed guards, gardeners, fieldhands, and expert horsemen and grooms for the stables."

Mr. Pinkerton enjoyed his estate until his death on July 1, 1884. His love for "The Larches" is shown in the provision in his will "that the place be kept in its present condition for seven years, then another seven, and if possible to remain in the family forever". But his sons William and Robert had other ideas.

ALLAN PINKERTON

He was born in Glasgow, Scotland, August 25, 1819. As a boy he learned the coopers trade. In 1842, embroiled in labor troubles, he fled to Canada, then to Chicago, and Dundee, Illinois. After only a few years in his trade, he was drawn into law enforcement work which finally resulted in his forming the Pinkerton organization which has known such great success in the law enforcement and security activities. During the Civil War, he was responsible for protecting Mr. Lincoln from an assassination plot in Baltimore in 1861, served General George B. McClellan both in Washington and in the field with an intelligence organization, and set up the Army Secret Service Department. It is said of the Pinkertons - "They were the 19th Century prototype of the present Federal Bureau of Investigation, a forerunner of the famous "Interpol" and in England they are still called "America's Scotland Yard". To attempt to tell the story of Mr. Pinkerton and his work is too much for this space.

THE FATE OF THE LARCHES

The two sons of Mr. Pinkerton had little interest in the estate and after his death, it was quickly converted to a farm. Many buildings were locked, some were demolished, and the house and Snuggery were not opened for a quarter of a century, when the place was sold and most of the movable equipment auctioned. Trees were cut, the pictures were removed except the murals, and gradually, the place deteriorated into a mere ghost of its former self.

Major Edward L. Davis, U.S.A. Ret., of Onarga has made a valiant effort to save The Larches and to restore it to its former status as a show place of real historic interest. Thus far, his success has been marked by the purchase of the house by Mr. Leslie Bork, nursery-man, of Onarga, who has made numerous repairs, has boarded up the fading murals, and secured it against vandalism, and has agreed to make no move for a time, pending a revival of interest in its whole or partial restoration.

In the meantime, it rests on the prairie land, waiting to see if any of its former glory may be returned by people or organizations who have respect for what Mr. Pinkerton accomplished.

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"The Larches", 24th in our series of prints of buildings of interest in the history of Illinois, was printed by hand from hand cut tulip wood blocks. Perhaps if enough interest is aroused in its preservation and restoration, The Larches may leave its ghost status and take its place in the interesting relics of Illinois of the past.

FRED AND BETTY TURNER