

News-Record
Thursday, Dec. 24, 2015

SMARTEN UP
@ The South Orange-Maplewood Adult School

From Adult School Class to 'Magnificent Obsession'

Go looking for Paul Degnan, professor of economics and marketing at Warren County Community College, and chances are you'll find him in the basement. With an oily rag in one hand, and maybe a piece of fine-grit sandpaper in the other.

Object of his attention: another of the dozens and dozens of American antiques that have come back to life under Paul's Pygmalion touch during the past 35 years or so. Chairs, tables, couches, cupboards -- if it's made of wood, Paul has rescued it, this piece from a second-hand store, that from another person's attic, many from auctions all over the East Coast.

It's a talent Paul says he was barely aware of back in 1979 when he signed up for his first Furniture Refinishing class at the South Orange-Maplewood Adult School.

"I'd tried refinishing pieces before, but using harsh, toxic chemicals. The teacher showed me how to do it properly without destroying the original finish," Paul recalls. For serious collectors, it's the original finish that determines the value of an antique, he explained. The secret, he learned, lies in lots of hand-rubbing.

"That Adult School class took me from kindergarten to graduate school in refinishing," he reports.

It also opened a vast new window on the 19th century world of antiques, Paul says, and launched the lifetime hobby that continues to preoccupy his spare time (he's also a Civil War buff, an expert on 19th-century history who has lectured at the Durand-Hedden House in Maplewood, and a prodigious collector of antique clocks, about which more in a minute).

Paul's new-found passion couldn't have come at a better time. He and wife Claire, both native New Yorkers, had moved to a vast Queen Anne Victorian

on Prospect St. in Maplewood, and there were not only many rooms to furnish but also acres of wood floors and trim, plus three flights of stairs, all in need of refinishing. Built in 1896, the house came with a storied past: tradition has its attic starring in one of Nancy Drew's mysteries (many ghost-written by Maplewoodian Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, who lived around the corner on North Terrace and also wrote Hardy Boys, Tom Swift 2nd, and Bobbsey Twins books under a variety of pen names).

Claire Degan, by the way, is also an historian and gifted interior designer -- she owns Town & Country Designs, was on the Ethan Allen design staff, and taught interior design at the Adult School for some 15 years. Also a member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and active in the German Society of Philadelphia, Claire had served on the board of the Durand-Hedden House before the couple moved to yet another old home, a 1907 four-square on College Hill in Easton, PA, a shorter commute to Paul's classroom at Warren County CC.

So now there's another basement workshop crowded with candidates waiting in line for Paul's refinishing magic. Not that he's ever idle, but it's fair to say that Paul has plenty of time on his hands -- think antique clocks, some 50 of them, including many that run on works made of wood, a discovery that surprised Paul in his early collecting days.

"I'd never seen that before," he recalls. The new fascination quickly grew into a magnificent obsession. Now an active member of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, headquartered in Columbia, PA, he and Claire regularly haunt auctions and clock shows up and down the Eastern Seaboard and west to Ohio and so.

Of his hobby-that-grew-into-a-passion Paul says, "It's relaxing, rewarding, and a pleasure to look at, once the work is done."

To look at, yes, but not to listen to: he never winds any of his antique clocks, Paul confides. "That would be a full-time job!"

And just imagine what midnight would sound like on College Hill!

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Rose Bennett Gilbert is a syndicated columnist and a fervent trustee of the South Orange-Maplewood Adult School