

"The most important work you will ever do is within the walls of your own home." ~ Harold B. Lee

This Old Ocean City Cottage

By JOSH KINNEY



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The cracking of wood, swinging of hammers and hacking of saws reverberated from the corner of Third and Central in Ocean City. Mike Picciani stood in the center of the street, arms folded, a bead of sweat dripping down his tanned forehead.

The three story house, or what remained of it, stood dilapidated and leaning, a porch riddled with holes and a garage that had been fined one too many times for being structurally unsound.

As Mike stood watching the restoration project unfold, the house shifted slightly and dipped further into a lean, knocking off a piece of the porch. He turned around, covered his face and slowly walked down the street toward the condo his family was renting for the summer.

"A few times I sat on that porch and wanted to wear a mask," said Picciani, a Delaware County, Pennsylvania native. "I was kind of embarrassed of the place at the time. Now, I couldn't be more proud of it."

In 1880, Albert H. Smith was the original owner of the now beautifully restored white home on the corner of third and central. It became a boarding house where many stayed when they came to visit the island during the summer months. At one point, the cost of staying for a whole week was just \$5.

Being one of the oldest homes in Ocean City, Mike decided to restore it to its original state. He received the home from his Mother-in-law, Ruth, after his father-in-law passed away. The family had owned the house since the early 1970s.

"He was a preacher and wanted to be close to the Tabernacle, which is why they chose this location," said Mike. The street, dotted with shady trees and beautiful old homes stands at the entrance of the historic district and is situated at the highest elevation on the island.

"During the major flood in 1962, the water only came up to the second step of the porch," said Picciani, walking around the finished product of his passion and creativity. Though it would have been cheaper to tear down the place, Mike went forward with his idea saying "It wasn't done for the investment, that's for sure."

The place was originally in such disrepair, deteriorating badly with much work needed. With no heat, electricity or air conditioning, only three fireplaces and a 100 year old brick foundation, the meticulous reconstruction began.

"Nobody could have afforded to reconstruct this thing... I wondered if I was taking drugs or someone was slipping something in my coffee," laughed Mike.



"I found the difference between restoration and renovation is a multiplier of three," he chuckled, speaking about the expensiveness of the project.

But the two years of hard work paid off, and the 1880 replica came to life, down to each door knob, shutter, and even the mailbox. The ceiling heights were maintained, the original solid wood doors were replicated as well as the porch pillars, cedar roof, windows, and the outside shutters. The bricks were replaced and the wood floors put in as the expenses increased along with Mike's headache. Though, he wouldn't have it any other way. This was his project, his art, and a price tag couldn't be placed on it.

Today, the home has its modern luxuries of air conditioning, electricity and heat, with nautical interior décor and matchless perfections. Everything else is identical to 1880, without a single piece of fiberglass on the entire house.

During the construction, others on the surrounding streets started fixing up their own homes. "It was contagious," he said, "and from a psychological point I found that very interesting."

The incredible amount of work put into making the home what it is today gets showered with compliments. Many have told Mr. Picciani that the house is something that's good for the whole neighborhood.

Lots of hard work and memories went in to the old white house on the corner but to Mike, standing back and marveling at his finished artwork, he believes the best stories are now.



Caption reads: "At 'the Cottage' in Ocean City, N.J., Dad's birthday, July 6, 1991. (L-R around table) Lee, Mike and Jr., Beth, Mom & Dad, Don, Louise and Miriam

Our hope at the SUN is always to provide locals and tourists with a nostalgic newspaper filled with positive stories and news. We make every effort to capture the heart of Ocean City, N.J. and to print the stories you will enjoy reading about. We are pleased to showcase a continuing series of "This Old House" stories, about a select group who value their old homes and want to keep them in their families for generations to come. Their painstaking renovation and restoration work to their old Ocean City homes would even inspire Bob Vila, the original old house guru from "This Old House" that first aired on PBS television in 1979. If you have a "This Old House" story to share, please call us at The SUN, 609-522-2721 or email sun-by-the-sea@verizon.net