





Legacy Of A Master Builder

*Theron Healy's Dream of
Minneapolis
Lingers In His
Queen Anne Architecture*

*By Trilby Busch Christensen
Photography By Phil Prowse*

Out of the wasteland of paving and steel poles the old homes rise in exuberant defiance. Motorists ripping along Interstate 35W in south Minneapolis catch a fleeting image of their sculptured shapes, their fanciful silhouettes.

Along the 31st Street exit of the freeway, the eastern side of the 3100 block of Second Avenue South remains a time warp in a city of glass skyscrapers and poured concrete highrises. On this block stand the most impressive assemblage of Queen Anne houses in Minneapolis.

For many Minnesotans these Queen Annes seem the archetype of the Victorian house. Onion dome towers, sinuously curving verandas, double front doors of solid oak, trellised balconies, tall chimneys, bays, dormers, and brackets adorn these houses in a riot of wood, brick, and glass. In the variety and richness of their decoration, it may not be immediately evident that all are essentially

The fancy millwork in the Bennett-McBride house at 3116 Third Ave. So. appears as it did a century ago.

the same shape—variations upon an architectural theme.

For much of this century the old Queen Annes of Second Avenue were virtually forgotten, brushed out of the civic consciousness as embarrassingly effusive, haughty remnants of a vanished age. In 1959 the west side of the 3100 block was demolished, along with hundreds of other houses, when the freeway was built. Ironically, it was the freeway construction that exposed the houses to public view.

In the summer of 1979 Anders Christensen began research for a neighborhood house tour involving 12 turn-of-the-century houses in the Lowry Hill East area (between Hennepin and Lyndale north of Lake Street in Minneapolis). The builder of three of the houses on tour that year was listed on the yellowed city building permits as "T. P. Healy."

At that point Christensen knew little about Healy, except for the intriguing discovery that he had been builder-contractor of 30 houses in the Lowry Hill East area alone. Although three of the houses had been demolished during the 1960s and 1970s to make room for walkup apartment buildings, Healy remains the most prolific builder in the neighborhood.

To learn more about the mysterious T. P., Christensen poured over old city directories to find out where Healy himself had lived. Healy's residence from 1892 to 1906 was at 3115 Second Avenue South. On a hunch, Christensen pulled the building cards for other houses on the 3100 block of Second Avenue South and discovered that all 11 had been built by Healy between 1886 and 1892.

Still, he knew nothing about Healy the man. Who was he? Where had he come from? Who were his descendants, and what happened to him? Working with Nat Forbes, who owned the 1899 Healy house at 2428 Bryant Avenue South, Christensen sent letters to the owners of every Healy-built house he knew of, and another letter to every Healy listed in the Minneapolis telephone directory.

It was shotgun research, but it paid off.

Finding Healy's descendants was an important link in the growing chain of information about the builder

chain of information about the build of those enchanting Queen Annes alongside the Minneapolis freeway. Through a combination of collected family reminiscences, historical documents from as far away as Nova Scotia and the Healy family genealogy, Christensen was finally able to compose a portrait of T. P. Healy—Minneapolis Master Builder:

Theron Potter Healy was born on May 14, 1844, at Round Hill, Nova Scotia. His family arrived in Canada from Devonshire, England, via Massachusetts, where his great-grandfather had been one of the founding fathers of Yarmouth.

In 1866 Theron married a woman three years his junior, Mary Ann Jefferson, also of Round Hill. Although born a Canadian, Mary Ann was descended from an uncle of Thomas Jefferson.

The Healys' three oldest children, Lena, Alice, and Charles, were born in the Round Hill-Annapolis area before the family moved to the bustling port of Halifax in 1872. In Halifax Theron became prosperous through maritime shipping.

Despite this success, financial ruin faced the family in 1882 when Healy's two ships, the *Lena* and the *Alice*, were lost at sea. No insurance covered the loss. Moreover, the damp and blustery climate of the Canadian coast had badly eroded Mary Ann's health.

At age 38, having already made and lost a fortune in Nova Scotia, Theron Healy faced a fateful decision. With eight children, and an ailing wife, Healy made the 3,000-mile journey to the Dakota Territory. Theron's brother, Granville, had already relocated there.

Apparently, Theron Healy was concerned about Indian attacks and outlaws in the wild American West, because he taught the oldest children how to shoot a rifle before they left Halifax.

A ninth child, Chester, was born in Bismarck in 1884, shortly before the Healys once again pulled up stakes and moved to the bustling town of Minneapolis. Although family legend has it that Theron could not drive a nail straight, he evidently was drawn to Minneapolis because of the frene-

tic building then underway. In the City of Lakes Theron would use his skill as a businessman to establish himself as a designer/contractor and master builder.

The decade of 1880-1890 was one of unprecedented growth and expansion for the capital city of flour milling. During that span Minneapolis grew from a compact little city of 40,000 to a sprawling center of trade with a population of more than 160,000. By 1890 it had supplanted St. Paul as the hub of commerce for the Upper Midwest.

T. P. Healy arrived in the midst of this feverish building period. On newly platted suburban housing tracts made accessible to the downtown in 1884 by extension of Thomas Lowry's horsecar trolley lines, houses sprouted like weeds. On what had once been a cow pasture on the Baker farmstead in south Minneapolis, Healy erected his first Minneapolis house.

Not much remains of the once-glorious exterior of Healy's inaugural Queen Anne, built in the spring of 1896 at 3137 Second Avenue South. Nine other Healy houses, built on the other side of the street, have totally disappeared.

During his Queen Anne period, Healy erected 20 houses on that block, as well as several around the corner on the 3100 block of Third Avenue South. One such is the Bennett-McBride house at 3116 Third Avenue South. On its exterior, the house is very much like other Healy Queen Annes, but its interior treatment has made it special.

An acknowledgment of its unique charm and beauty came in 1976, when the Bennett-McBride house was selected as the Goodwill Industries' Designer Showcase Home. Nine years earlier, Ron Domanski and Norm Lindberg had bought the house from Esther McBride, whose parents bought the home in 1904.

Originally built for lumberman H. H. Bennett in 1891, the house boasts exceptional interior millwork—its dining room features quar-

OPPOSITE: Grandest of the surviving Healy homes, 2546 Portland today houses Lee Brothers Photographers.



ter-sawn oak. The lacy fretwork, inside and out, has survived assaults of nearly a century of modernists. And yet to see the house today is to see it essentially as it appeared in the 19th century. In the Bicentennial year, with its heightened sense of history, the Bennett-McBride house was the perfect showcase for a display of interior design.

In 1977 it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Although the historic connections between the Bennett-McBride house and its neighboring houses on Second and Third Avenues South had not yet been made, the rediscovery of these extraordinary Queen Annes and their extraordinary builder was underway.

Healy built for a society that was house proud, yet stylistically conservative. The Queen Anne style, misleadingly named after the 17th century British monarch, emerged in England in the 1860s and '70s through the works of architects Norman Shaw, Philip Webb and others. It is a playfully romantic architectural style developed in reaction to the dark, ponderous mahogany interiors and dull stucco exteriors of houses favored by the mid-Victorian establishment.

By the time Healy began building his Queen Annes in south Minneapolis, the style in its vernacular form had been thoroughly adapted to the available materials and craftsmanship of his day and place. In most cases, that meant immigrant carpenters (often Scandinavians) working with lumber cut from Minnesota's virgin forests.

Minnesota pine comprised the internal structure of the houses, which were finished in oak, cherry, walnut, mahogany, birch, maple, or Western ponderosa pine millwork and flooring. Built-in architectural elements, such as buffets, mantelpieces, newel-posts, and marquetry were customarily ordered from catalogues.

It would be misleading to assume, however, that because builders used mass-produced elements, often from the same catalogues, that one vernacular Queen Anne is hardly distinguishable from the next: Healy might not have been an artisan, but he was decidedly a skillful designer of

homes. His Queen Annes are all basically box-shaped, while sculptured with bays, balconies, porches, and towers into the most elegant of architectural confections, embellished with filigreed wood and jewel-like glass.

Yet despite his use of a variety and profusion of shapes and details, Healy combined those elements with a keen sense of balance and proportion. The result is that each Healy house has its own unique design, while bearing the unmistakable mark of its builder. If any Minneapolis master builder deserves the title "King of the Queen Anne," it is most assuredly T. P. Healy.

He would probably be gratified to hear Carolyn MacDonald describe her 1891 Healy Queen Anne as "pretty"—the very word applied to Norman Shaw's exquisite red brick houses in London's Bedford Park—a complete Queen Anne suburb of the 1870s. But tastes in architecture changed, and even a master builder had to keep up with the current vogue if he wanted to stay in business.

A watershed in Healy's career as a designer came in June of 1893 with the construction of a relatively expensive (\$7,000) house at 2320 Colfax Avenue South. The house, currently a shabby rooming house with asbestos siding, represents a significant change from Healy's earlier rectangular-shaped structures with gable end roofs. The house at 2320 Colfax is squarer, more symmetrical, more compact in its massing than Healy's earlier houses. It was a decided change from the fanciful invention of Queen Anne design.

The change did not occur through mere chance. The World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893 irrevocably altered what was considered chic in residential architecture. The irregularly shaped Queen Anne, customarily painted in dark or subdued earth tones, was abandoned in favor of the classical regularity of the pure white colonial revival or neo-classical house.

From 1893 on, Healy's houses grew simpler and more massive. Gone were the closed foyers and par-

lor spindlework; gone were the high many-tiered mantelpieces, and the whimsical turrets. In their place came squarer, more open floor plans and plainer, more massive millwork.

While one of the most fashionable middle-class suburbs of the 1880s and early 1890s had been Healy's neighborhood in south-central Minneapolis, as the end of the century approached, the most prestigious place to build became Lowry Hill—behind Thomas Lowry's huge second empire style mansion on Hennepin Avenue. From 1893 until his death, Healy built 27 of the large, imposing classically inspired homes on Lowry Hill.

As a master builder, Healy constructed not only his designs, but those of others. Of Healy's Lowry Hill houses, he designed 13 himself and 14 were designed by architects. It is a testament to his acumen as a businessman and to the quality of his buildings that only five years after he put up his first house architects were selecting him to build from their plans.

The first architect to work with Healy was Harry Jones, whose best-known building is Butler Square. In May of 1891 Healy began building Jones' design, a clapboard Queen Anne with a wonderful cone-capped turret, for B.R. Coppage at 1912 Queen Avenue South in Kenwood. Healy's prestige must have been given a significant boost when that particular Queen Avenue house was subsequently featured in *Northwest Architect and Builder*, a prominent architectural journal.

More commissions for Healy followed in rapid succession. Over the years Healy came to build for many of Minneapolis's most celebrated architects: Jones, Frank and Louis Long, Frederick Kees, Serenus Colburn, James McLeod, Lowell Lamoreaux, F.A. Clark, William Channing Whitney, William Kenyon, Edwin P. Overmire, Ernest Kennedy, Arthur Bishop Chamberlain, George

OPPOSITE: Healy descendants: On porch from left, Bill White, Eleanor Garoutte, Don White, John White, David Healy and John Cunningham; on steps from left, Stephen Healy, Richard Healy White, Jeff White, Peter Healy and Burton Healy.



The most unique perspective on the history and architecture of Healy is that of John Cunningham, the grandson of Theron's daughter Alice. The discovery of the quantity and quality of Healy's buildings has left Cunningham, himself a Minneapolis architect, astonished.

"Healy became involved in building right at the beginning of formal training in architecture," observes Cunningham. In those days one became involved in building and became skilled at it.

"I think of Healy as an architect. He developed his own style of building. It is most unique—a recognizable individual style. He borrowed from others—as we always borrow. Borrowing is a good thing... and Healy always enriched what he took. Even though he was from Nova Scotia, he developed an identifiable, distinctly Minneapolis style."

Moreover, Cunningham says, "Healy had the modesty and maturity to work well with others. I suspect he was a proud man, without abundant flaws of ego."

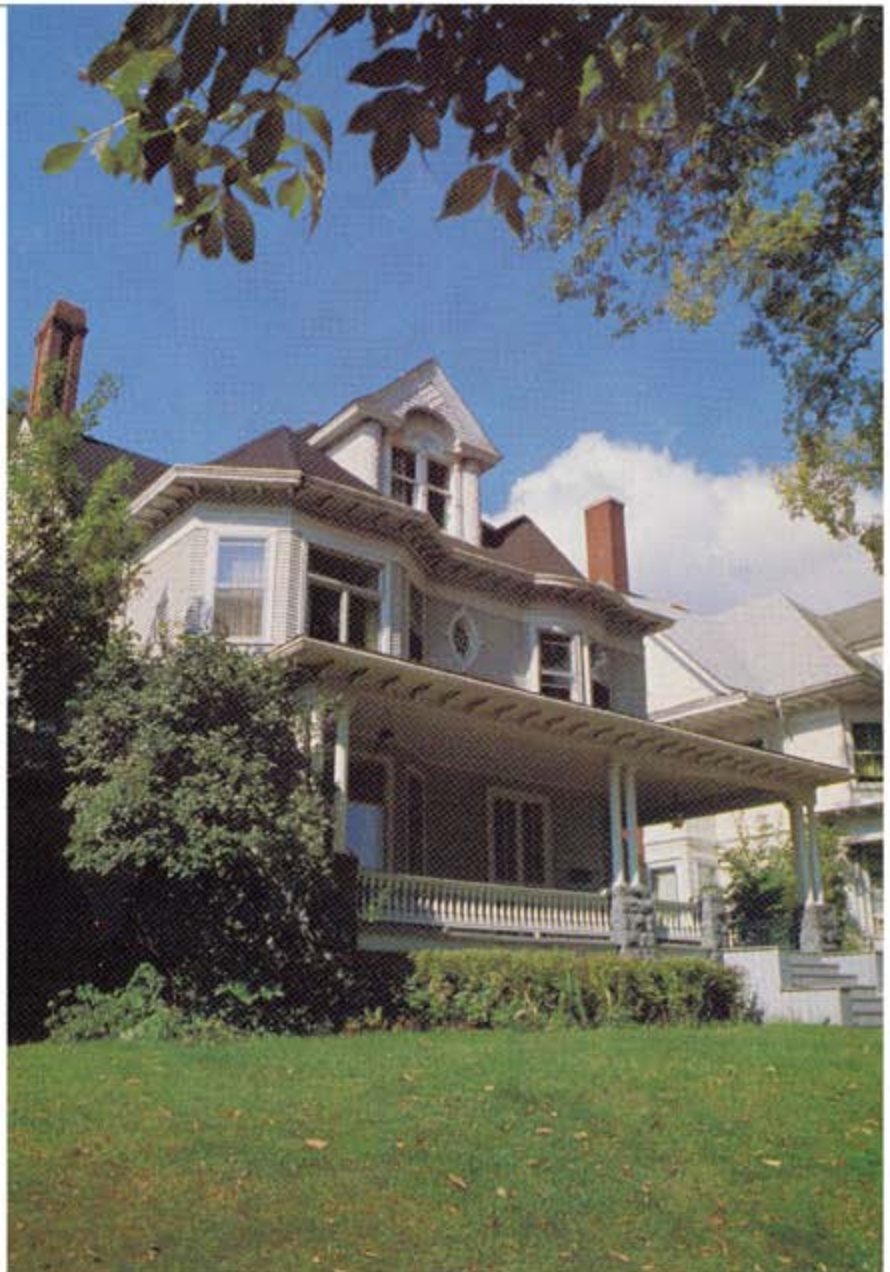
Theron wasn't the only Healy with a creative bent, however. "My aunts Alice and Elizabeth were both artists," Cunningham notes. "When, as a child I did drawings, members of the family used to remark that it was 'the Healy coming out' in me."

Before researcher Christensen contacted him, Cunningham, whose architectural offices are housed in William Channing Whitney's 1887 Merrill House at 22nd and Second Avenue South, knew very little of Healy's work, nor did the other contemporary Healys.

One of the Healys listed in the phone book turned out to be T.P.'s grandson Burton, who supplied a photo of his forebear. A granddaughter, Ann Healy Strothman, offered a copy of the Healy family tree, a project completed by T.P.'s daughter, the late Bessie Healy.

Two other members of this generation of Healys turned out to be living in Minneapolis: Richard White of Lowry Hill and his sister, Eleanor Garoutte of Kenwood.

The family home at 3115 Second



1712 Dupont Avenue So., from Healy's neo-classical period.

Avenue South had been sold shortly before Mrs. Healy's death in 1928. But Richard White recalls family Thanksgiving dinners with 30 people around the table in the old house. And Ann Strothman and Eleanor Garoutte remember snatches of family folklore about their grandfather and his buildings.

One sunny May afternoon this year Christensen had invited Mrs. Strothman, Mrs. Garoutte, and John Cunningham to his own home to piece together the shreds of information he had acquired. Christensen was

studying a photograph of T.P. Healy as a young man with Mrs. Garoutte and Mrs. Strothman, when Cunningham came to the door.

All were immediately struck with the remarkable resemblance between the image on the photograph and his descendent standing before them. The shape of the head and face, the eyes, the nose, the hairline—the similarity was stunning. But more arresting than merely the physical resemblance, was the realization that

(Continued on page 125)

1303-07-11 Yale Place in Loring Park. At \$75,000 this red brick apartment building was his most expensive structure.

Healy and architect Adam Lansing Dorr erected a handsome brick and concrete apartment building at 63-65-67 South 10th Street, next to the present YWCA building.

On the evening of February 6, 1906, as he was taking his daily after-dinner constitutional, the 62-year-old Healy collapsed on the sidewalk a

short distance from his home. Family members reported he was profoundly disappointed to have been stricken just as he was becoming the most eminent master builder in the city. There was still so much to build, he complained.

At 10:30 that evening, Theron P. Healy died of apparent heart failure at the house he had built at 3115 Second Avenue South. Three days later he was buried in Lakewood Cemetery.

His eldest daughter, Lena, working

Master Builder

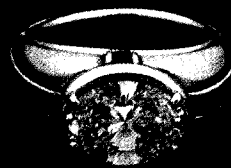
(Continued from page 80)

a Healy great-grandson was designing Minneapolis buildings, just as his ancestor had done nearly a century before.

We will probably never know what Healy was like personally. Yet we may still turn to the impressive accomplishment of the last two decades of his life—the buildings he created.

In addition to his houses, Healy built the 1902 YWCA, a four-story classically simple brick and stone structure that stood at 87 South Seventh Street in downtown Minneapolis. Like some of Healy's largest houses, this building was designed by William Channing Whitney.

The old YWCA was demolished during the summer of 1936. But Healy's largest building still stands at



Some people spend years searching city after city,
traveling further and further away still wondering,
"Where are the exciting jewels?"

While, all along, they are
being manufactured on
Wayzata's Laketrout



FREDRICK BETLACH, INC. 539 EAST LAKE STREET WAYZATA, MN 55391 612/473-8833

The Wyer-Pearce Gallery

Now Showing—through Nov. 14
"The Coupling Series"
Charging horses and
clinging riders
Abstract pastels on paper
by Merrily Borg Babcock

Nov. 20 thru Christmas
Minnesota Landscapes,
North Shore, Lake Minnetonka,
Rolling Farmlands
and Snowscapes by
three Minnesota masters:
Don Koestner, Cliff Moen and
Howard Sivertson

201 Mill Street
Excelsior, Minnesota 55331
612/474-6966

ROYAL COPENHAGEN PORCELAIN[®]



Skillful Hands

Come and see the skillful hands of Marianne Bjufstrøm, on exhibition from The Royal Copenhagen Factory in Denmark, as she demonstrates the flawless craftsmanship of porcelain painting. An excellence known only to Royal Copenhagen Porcelains.

The Nordic Shops



110 West Center
Rochester, MN 55901
Mon., Nov. 9, 10-8 p.m.
Tues., Nov. 10, 10-5 p.m.

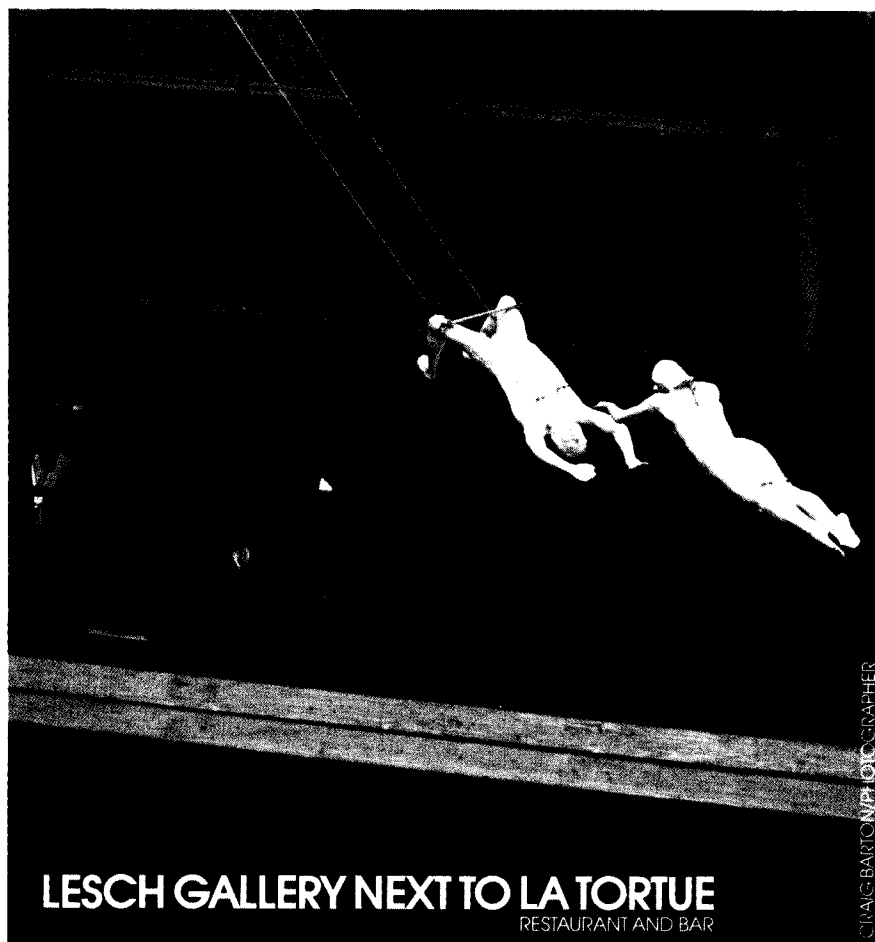
Hyatt Regency Hotel
Minneapolis, MN 55403
Wed., Nov. 11, 10-9 p.m.

with Healy's top foreman, Nels Jenson, tried to keep the business going. Together, they produced two exceptional houses. The first was brewer Charles Gluek's brick and tile house built in 1907 at 1005 Mount Curve, designed by architects Boehme and Cordella (designers of the American Swedish Institute). A year later, at 1809 James Avenue South, they built a frame and stucco house designed by William Kenyon. It would be the last of the T.P. Healy Company; on completion Lena gave up her father's business.

It was up to Jenson, a Swedish-born carpenter, to carry on the craft of the Healy tradition. He was a superb carpenter and foreman, but he was no designer of buildings. Healy's death came near the end of the heyday of the master builder. As the craftsman tradition died out, the kind of houses it produced died out as well. Their extravagant, almost prolifigate use of materials, the proud skill of their craftsmen, the profusion of details lavished upon them—these gradually faded away as the 20th century progressed. Though much has vanished, much remains. Today, hundreds of Minneapolis residents live in buildings T.P. Healy constructed. What we know most certainly about Healy is that *he produced*.

But if you wish to glimpse his aura, that particular Healy mystique, go some day at dusk to the row of houses he built on Second Avenue South. There, in the golden half-light you might possibly see once again the resplendent incarnations of Theron Healy's most splendid dreams.

TC



LESCH GALLERY NEXT TO LA TORTUE
RESTAURANT AND BAR

Heart to Heart . . .

because love and diamonds
are bonded together forever



14 kt. gold diamond pendant

CARLSTROM
CARLSTROM
CARLSTROM
CARLSTROM



227 Cargill Building
Skyway Level
Minneapolis, MN. 55402
(612) 332-0846