Looking Backward at Chicago of the Elegant Eighties

Era of Hand-Gilded Rolling Pins Is Recalled

Put away the little coal hod that our darling wants to paint,
For she fain would decorate it with devices queer and quaint;
Hide the dustpan and the washtub, and likewise the garden hose,
Or Matilda will adorn them with the lily and the rose.

When our Bridget, in the morning, gets the wooden chopping bowl
To concoct the breakfast corned beef hash, it vexes of her soul
To find a wreath of roses where she most would cut and slash,
So she scrapes it off, for fear the paint might penetrate the hash.

On the household rolling-pin is tied a pretty yellow bow,
And its lilies of the valley oft commingle with the dough,
While the new potato masher and the kitchen pans and pots
Are magnificent with butterflies and sweet forget-me-nots.

All our articles of furniture, the ancient and the new,
Are resplendent quite with drapery and bows of brightest hue;
In the house we look about with mingled sorrow and amaze,
For Matilda is afflicted with the decorative craze.

—From a Woman's Magazine of the Eighties.

By HERMA CLARK

WHEN you bought or built a new house in the elegant eighties you didn't call in an interior decorator to help you furnish it. You watched what your friends were doing; you shopped in the best furniture stores, and you racked your brain to devise something new for the house. For the interior decorator, as we understand the term today, was not in existence, unless we except an artistic member of the staf of one of Chicago's large furniture stores, who did designing in a small way. But few indeed were those who could afford to employ such an adviser.

Oscar Wilde, in England, was telling people how they ought to decorate their homes, but his affectations did not incline the new world to accept his pronouncements. Wilde represented the esthetic movement satirized by Gilbert and Sullivan in the comic opera "Patience" and was always identified with the hero,

A greenery-gallery,
Grosvenor gallery,
Foot-in-the-grave young man.

Sometimes the housewife, furnishing her new home, was inventive enough to produce a new form of art for it. For instance, someone gilded a rolling-pin, screwed hooks into it, tied a bow on each handle, and hung it up on the wall as a repository for shoe buttoners.

No one knows who started the idea, but it spread over the country until few homes were without a sample of this new art. Manufacturers of woodenware worked day and night turning out miniature kitchen utensils to be decorated by the home artist. As Christmas gifts they were grand, exemplifying the truth of the scriptural text, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Potato mashers, painted or gilded, and ornamented with a bright bow of satin ribbon (a potato masher became an object of art when a satin ribbon was tied to it) were used for bedroom ornaments. They were more or less useful, for you could hang your rings on the attached hooks when you went to bed. A motto often painted on the transformed potato masher was "Rings and Things."

Sometimes the decorative craze spent itself on a wooden chopping bowl whose concave side was painted with a view of Niagara falls. This was set in the yawning mouth of the fireplace in summer and was a nice conversation starter. The caller would begin, "Well, I see you've got someone in your house who does hand painting." And mother would admit that Pansy Belle was trying her hand at art, and the family thought it looked real nice.

Sometimes chopping bowls were lined with red velvet on which a design had been embroidered, such as an ear of corn—corn that stood up, so you could feel the kernels. A triumph of art, that was.

A child's school slate was often used as an object to be beautified. The red felt edging was gilded, and on the slate itself might be painted a row of tipsy sparrows, or two owls with a crescent moon behind them.

The butter ladle of our dairying ancestors was painted, tied with a bow, and hung on the wall. Nor did the frying pan escape. It was used to contain a scene of winter delights. The small coal shovel lent itself nicely to such decoration. Sister depicted on this an old mill, the roof of which, powdered with mica, gave a realistic touch of ice and snow.

"Banners," to be hung on the wall, formed another angle of the craze. On a background of red plush were painted or embroidered water lilies, sunflowers, or goldenrod. Oscar Wilde was responsible for the sunflower craze.

Did you need an umbrella stand in the elegant eighties? You got a round drain tile and painted it a light tan, for background, on which you superimposed a design of goldenrod or daisies. But maybe you didn't need an umbrella stand. All right! Use the hand-painted tile for holding a large bunch of cat-tails, placing it in a corner of the parlor. Artistic? Well, rather! Wish Oscar Wilde could see how Pansy Belle made home beautiful with simple articles like that.

Fluff of Milkweed Used for Decoration

On every picture in the parlor a "drape" must be hung. A picture frame without such an accessory looked quite naked. From the pod of milkweed you got a fluffy substance which you put into a net bag, tied with ribbon, and hung over the corner of the frame of a picture, a chair, sofa, or sideboard. For don't forget, a cardinal principle of interior decoration was that every article of furniture must wear a sash or bow of some kind.

The china shade of your kerosene lamp was attired in a silk petticoat. Your mantel shelf was covered with a lambrequin made of macramé cord. Through its meshes a bright red ribbon was run, and it looked quite gay, the long fringe hanging a foot or more below the shelf. Of course, if you preferred you could drape the shelf with a piece of felt which you had embroidered or painted with a design of goldenrod or daisies.

One author goes on to state that he has recently fitted up two dining rooms in which this style of decoration (the motto) has been worked into stained glass. Among other proverbs, the architect selected "Hunger is the best sauce," "Welcome is the best cheer," and "Eat at pleasure, drink by measure." The latter saying hints that sometimes a guest took a wee sip too much.

While it is not in accordance with present-day taste to offer these sayings in stained glass or the walls of homes, to be read by guests, legendary decoration has always appealed to me strongly. The home of Judge Mark Skinner, which stood at the southwest corner of Rush and Ontario streets, had an interesting motto above the fireplace in the great hall. It was, if memory serves, "East, west; hame's best." And a west side mansion, that of Thomas Chalmers, father of William J. Chalmers of Chicago, pictured in stained glass in a window on its staircase a Walter Scott incident, with the legend:

Drink, weary pilgrim, drink and pray
For the kind soul of Sibyl Gray,
Who gave this cross and well.

his name. He lived in the time of the Gothic revival in Europe and wrote enthusiastically of it, wherefore his name was given to any furniture or architecture that was much carved or had a pointed design.

The bracket scroll got busy at this time, making almost everything ornamental for the home in wood. Little brackets for the corner of the room—some of them rather good—were made by boys and men.

Ornate Brass Beds Make Their Appearance

The present-day interior decorator wisely tries to create an environment in which the occupant is at home, and again in this day many women are learning the art of decoration, out of fashion for a time. Quilts, bedspreads, rugs are all being made by loving hands, so that much of the spirit of joy and pride in the making of a home has come back.

The furniture of the eighties was most often golden oak, which supplanted the mahogany and rosewood and walnut of the antebellum period. Housewives sent to the attic the lovely old pieces grandma had gone to housekeeping with, and the much-carved oak or bird's-eye maple or birch replaced this. Because it was new, it delighted the owner, even though its shape was not so pleasing. Brass beds began to appear on the scene. Housekeepers were told that these were sanitary, and they believed that not to own a brass bed was to be behind the times. How ornate some of those brazen beds were!

The folding bed reared its head in this decade. It was not so well balanced as the disappearing bed of today, and sometimes swallowed up its occupants in a disconcerting manner.

The lighting arrangements of the eighties were not beautiful according to our modern ideas. Electricity had not yet made its way into the home, for only the very rich could afford the necessary dynamo in the basement, though public buildings were now equipped with the new form of lighting invented by that young Mr. Edison.

Gas chandeliers hung in the center of almost every room, most of them ungraceful in design, of lightweight brass, with two or possibly four branches, at the end of which were perched glass globes. Kerosene lamps were still used for reading, as it was impossible to conduct gas to a table lamp with entirely satisfactory results. Sometimes rubber tubing was used for this purpose, but it often sprang a leak and gave trouble.

Photographs Reveal Homes of the Eighties

Through the courtesy of Mrs. Henry Frederick Fuller of Chicago we are able to show some rare photographs taken by her husband, the late Henry F. Fuller, revealing the decoration and furniture of some Chicago homes of the eighties. We do not see in these photographs any of the kitchen utensils decorated for ornaments, but we find furniture and pictures very much draped, after the most approved fashion of the time.

The Fuller family lived at 470 North State street (old number), the site now occupied by an apartment building numbered 1320 North State parkway. Henry Weld Fuller, the father, had founded a wholesale drug firm in the fifties and had prospered with the young city. He was a man of distinction in appearance, character, and intellect. His brother was Melville W. Fuller, chief justice of the United States Supreme court. His wife was literary in her tastes, and the musical and literary people of their time often gathered at this North State street home for entertainments. This house, photographed by Henry Frederick Fuller, is shown in an illustration.

The son, Henry Frederick Fuller, was a man of phenomenal versatility. He was a graduate of the old University of Chicago; attended Western Theological seminary in preparation for ordination as a priest of the Episcopal church, a purpose he relinquished; studied law at Hamilton college, winning prizes for his proficiency; was a pupil of Clarence Eddy, great Chicago organist, and of Sir John Stainer of England; was an excellent painter in water color and oil, which he studied for three years. Some of his musical compositions were published before he was eighteen and include many hymns and religious pieces for violin and organ.

He was a genealogist of repute, had taken out patents for several inventions, and was a member of several scientific societies in America and England. Added to all these interests was a delight in photography, to which he devoted much time.

Photographs by the young photographer that appear here bore no legends, but some of them have been identified. One shows the Fuller tandem, with groom and coachman, ready for a spin down the avenue. Perhaps it was about to depart for the Washington Park race track on a Derby day. The sight of the horses and driver will recall to older readers memories of the "hippic age," as Hobart Chatfield-Taylor, formerly of Chicago, calls the era of the horse. Mr. Chatfield-Taylor married the beautiful Rose Farwell, daughter of Senator Charles B. Farwell of Lake Forest, and they became the parents of Wayne Chatfield-Taylor of Lake Forest and of Mrs. Adelaide Chatfield-Taylor Whitman of Boston. Hobart Chatfield-Taylor, now living in Montecito, Cal., was a lover of horses as well as a writer, and some years ago, in a chapter he contributed to Miss Carolyn Kirkland's "Chicago Yesterdays," he wrote sadly of the changes brought by the coming of the automobile.

"The chugging motor car," he said, "which has supplanted the horse-drawn vehicle, bears the same relation to a well appointed drag that an ocean tramp steamer does to a clipper ship with a 'bone in her teeth.'"

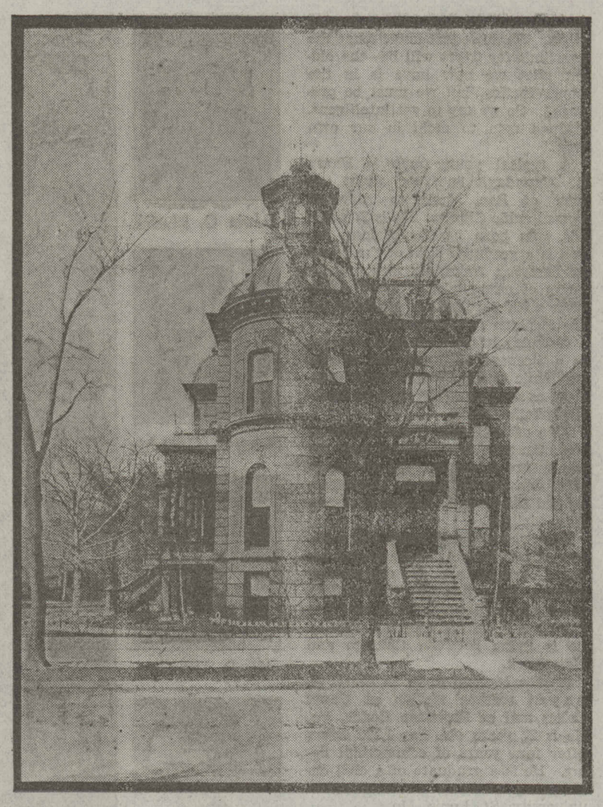
They Drove Horses to the Horse Races

Arthur Caton (first husband of the present Mrs. Marshall Field Sr. of Washington) drove a Brewster drag and a team of bays when he attended the races; R. Hall McCormick, father of the present Robert Hall McCormick, drove a London-built drag; while Mr. Chatfield-Taylor, himself one of Chicago's fashionable young men, sported a Kimball drag with yellow wheels. It was not the easiest task in the world to "tool" this vehicle properly; to flick the leader with the whip and then "fold" it neatly. If the eyes of the sweetest girl in the world were upon you, as she rode by your side, it was doubly difficult.

Among the interior views shown is a bedroom partially identified as a room in the home of the Chatfield-Taylors in Lake Forest. A parlor in the home of Mrs. Chatfield-Taylor's father, Senator Farwell, shows the approved lambrequin on the mantel, which is crowded with small photographs, the fashion in the eighties. In the foreground on the floor is a pillow to be stumbled over in the dark. Pillows were ubiquitous in the homes of yesterday.

Another Lake Forest interior shows the master of the house, John V. Farwell, with his two grandsons, the young Tutties. Mr. Farwell, father of the present John V. Farwell of Chicago, was a stanch churchman, interested in the Young Men's Christian association and other religious and benevolent organizations. He is seen appropriately reading "The Record of Christian Work." Again the fashion of draping the mantelpiece is to be noted, with photographs in profusion standing about.

No page of pictures of life in the eighties would be complete without a representation of bicycle riders, and we are able to show two young Chicagoans standing by their high wheels with all the pride of the Arab with his blooded horse. One of them is Burley B. Ayers, an ardent member of the League of American Wheelmen; the other, Henry Frederick Fuller, who made some of the photographs seen on this page, for the bicycle was a hobby of the versatile Chicagoan.

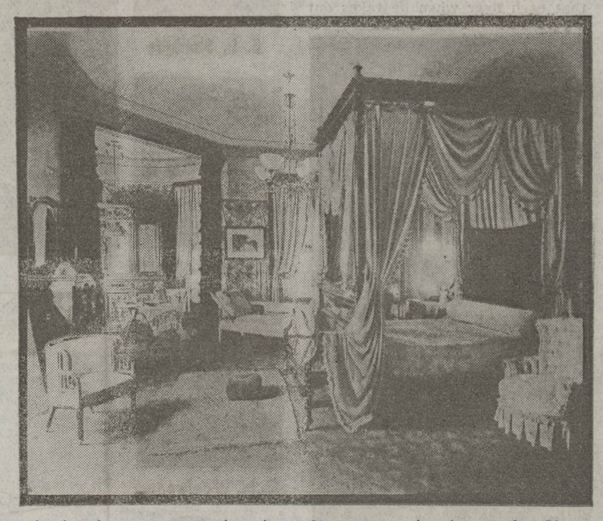


Home of Henry Weld Fuller, 470 North State street (old number). The site is now 1320 North State parkway.

(Photo courtesy Robert C. Griffin, Chicago.)

John V. Farwell, pioneer Chicago merchant, seen here in his home in Lake Forest, reading to his two grandsons. Furnishings of the room proclaim the period of the late eighties.

A much-ornamented brass bed in the home of the late Leon Mandel, 3409 Michigan avenue. The details are quite typical of the "elegant eighties."



This handsome room is thought to be a guest chamber in the Chatfield-Taylor home in Lake Forest. The photograph was taken by Henry Frederick Fuller.

Parlor in the summer home of United States Senator Charles B. Farwell in Lake Forest. Gas was then the illuminating medium.

Unusual tandem hitch, two horses and a leader. Thought to be the Fuller equipage. Photograph is one taken by Henry Frederick Fuller but it was not captioned by him.

(Photo courtesy Mrs. Henry F. Fuller.)

Burley B. Ayers in a snappy bicycle suit of the eighties. Observe the straw hat and the patent lether pumps.

(Photo courtesy Mrs. Henry F. Fuller.)

Henry Frederick Fuller ready for a century run on his high wheel. Photo was made by Max Platz, a famous photographer of the period.