

THE SLOSS HOUSE BY JEFFREY CHICK

Historic Profile

The architecture of Iowa State University has a curious motley character: on campus is a small Victorian house tucked away amid the shrubbery and pines. It's huddled to the north beside a towering giant called Curtiss Hall. This small cottage has the appearance of a family dwelling, which it was at one time. The Sloss House, also called the "Pines," is one of the few remaining college-owned family homes left on campus. At one time there were 15 college-owned family homes on the ISU campus. Today four remain, of which Sloss House is one of them.

The original purpose for building homes on campus was to enable the professors to be nearer to the campus. At that time, in the late 1800s, the primary mode of transportation between Ames and the college was that of a horse-drawn street car. By 1886, eight professors were housed on campus and the faculty families formed a little community. So convenient and socially desirable was campus dwelling regarded that there was strong competition for houses when they became vacant.

Sloss House was built in 1883 for Professor Charles E. Bessey of the Botany Department who, at the time of his start in 1882, was the acting President of the college while President Welch was in Europe. Dr. Bessey and his family resided in the house until he was elected Head of the Department of Botany at the University of Nebraska in 1884.

Following the departure of Dr. Bessey, Byron D. Halsted, Professor of Botany, moved into Sloss House. Halsted and his family lived there for four years, from 1885-1888.

From 1890-92 Louis Hermann Pammel, also a Professor of Botany, and his family used the residence.

G.E. Patrick, Professor of Agricultural Chemistry, and his family moved into the house after the Pammels' departure and used the residence from 1893-1894.

The house was then occupied by William Suddards Franklin, Professor of Electric Engineering and the Chair of the Physics Department, and his family from 1895-1896.

From 1897-1908 the residence was used by G.W. Bissell, Professor of Mechanical Engineering, and his family until his departure from ISU.

Warren H. Meeker, another Mechanical Engineering Professor, and his family occupied the house from 1909 until 1915. Meeker was the last professor to reside in the house.

The next occupant was J.G. Hanmer and his family in 1916. He was assistant to President Pearson and used the residence until Pearson left office in 1924.

With the construction of MacKay Hall about to begin, the Bevier House had to be moved between November 1924 and March 1925 to a location just east of the Metallurgy Building on Pammel Drive. The resident of the house for the last 14 years had been Thomas Sloss, Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds at ISU and his family. The Sloss' were able to move to the "Pines" due to the departure of Hanmer in 1924; it was at this location that they lived for the next 11 years. Since the Sloss' resided at

this residence longer than any previous occupant, the house was named in their honor.

In 1937, Thomas Sloss died and the family moved. The University then rented the house to the Delta Zeta Sorority for one year while the sorority searched for permanent housing.

From 1938-47 the house was used as a Home Management House. Senior women in Home Economics spent six weeks living together to learn how to handle practical problems in the home.

Ben W. Schafer, Superintendent of the Physical Plant, rented the house in 1948. He and his family lived there until his retirement in 1969. Schafer explained that, "It is necessary for me to live on campus in case of any emergency which may arise within my responsibilities" (Carmichael, 1959).

The Applied Arts Department moved into the Sloss House in 1970 after the Schafers moved out. The tiny rooms were packed full of looms, yarns, jewelry, and students practicing their crafts of weaving and jewelry-making until 1978.

The Sloss House was then used by the Agricultural Education and Sociology Departments for office space from 1978-82.

In 1980, the Women's Center was established on the first floor and from 1983-1986, the building was jointly occupied by the Margaret Sloss Women's Center and the Committee on Lectures. Since 1986, the Women's Center has occupied the entire building. The Women's Center was named in honor of Thomas Sloss' daughter, Margaret Sloss, the first woman to graduate in Veterinary Medicine from ISU and also a member of the Veterinary Medicine Faculty from 1923-72.

Background

Bid for construction of the Sloss House in 1882 came to \$2,200 for six rooms. The project ran over budget and actually cost the college \$2,490. The architect of the original house was J.B. Ballenger and the contractor was V. Tomlinson. A porch was added in 1884 to the west elevation. In November 1884, Professor Bessey submitted a request for reimbursement of \$104.50 for expenses he incurred in making the house fit for his family to occupy. His work included sheeting the house with tarred paper, and building a wood shed, a well house, and a privy.

Some minor repairs were made in 1897 and 1904 while George W. Bissell and his family resided there and again in 1915 before J.A. Hanmer and his family moved into the residence. However, there are no records of what exactly was done to the house during those repair periods.

Extensive repairs were made to the house in 1925, prior to its use by Thomas Sloss and his family as a residence. These repairs and additions included: the extension of the south porch into a sun room with a sleeping room located above, the removal of the porch across the west elevation, the addition of a study to the southeast corner and a garage on the northwest corner, and the construction of a second floor bath and a hallway. A total of \$6,500 was allocated for the work.

If such extensive additions and repairs were made at today's prices, the \$6,500 that was allocated for the total project in 1925 would only build the garage now.

Description of the Building

The Sloss House is located in Ames, Iowa on the Iowa State University Campus. This stately little house is nestled among pine trees with a spectacular view to the west of the University's central campus. To the north and just 50 feet away, the cottage is loomed by Curtiss Hall; to the southeast it is complimented by Osborn Cottage.

When Sloss House was built in 1883, it was both a significant and dominant building. The location of the college necessitated housing for part of the faculty, since Ames proper was a half-hour horse ride away. This structure marked the boundary of the faculty community from the rest of the college. At the time of its completion, it was one of the twelve buildings on the campus. It was easily recognized by the hundred or so students which were attending the college then.

Today, the Sloss House has become lost in the University's growth over the last 100 years. However, it still retains most of its original character with the surrounding environment. Everything remains virtually unchanged, as if it has just been completed, except for the overgrowth of some of the vegetation and the fact that Curtiss Hall is to the north. A view from the house to the west, south, and east can give you a historic feeling of what the campus may have actually looked like in its early years. This type of character can not be perceived from many buildings of the same period.

Present State of Repair

The Sloss House is in remarkably good condition for a structure that is more than 100 years old. As with all buildings, whether mature or modern, ongoing maintenance will continue to be an important aspect of insuring the building's functionality. And, as with any building, a few minor problems exist, but they can be easily corrected. Problem areas, if properly corrected, should curtail any further damage; the Sloss House should survive for at least another 100 years.

Accessibility

The Sloss House, having been built as a private residence, did not have to provide a building that was accessible to and functional for the physically disabled.

This concern was not even addressed until the 1980s when the Margaret Sloss Women's Center and the Committee on Lectures took residence in the building. At that time a new accessible entry for the disabled was first considered, but never pursued. This issue arose again in the winter of 1986.

A very prominent women's rights activist was scheduled to speak at ISU in February 1986. She had been told how nice the Women's Center was and wanted to visit it. About three weeks before she was to speak, it was found that she was paraplegic. Therefore, in order for her to visit the Women's Center, a ramp had to be erected for her use. In order to get the funds and work completed on time, a special appropriation was obtained from President Parks. A temporary ramp was initially built because there was not enough time to construct a permanent ramp and it only needed to last until the completion of the permanent ramp. Today, however, differently-abled individuals are able to access the first floor of the Center by way of a permanent ramp.

Parking and passenger loading zones are available southeast of the house. However, this parking does not provide an adequate path of travel to the existing ramp. A shorter mode of travel should be provided to make it easier for the disabled to arrive at their destination.

Accessibility for the disabled within the facility is limited only to the first floor. The second floor may only be reached by way of the two stairways, thus rendering it inaccessible to the disabled.

The main level is completely accessible by wheelchair and provides a sufficient restroom for the disabled.

Since the Sloss House was not built with any regard towards the disabled, it would not be in the character of the building, nor would it be practical to make the entire house accessible. Because the first floor is already accessible, the important functions of the building could be contained on this level.

Energy Conservation

The only measure taken to upgrade the building in terms of energy usage was the wrapping of insulation around the existing steam pipes in the basement. Since the Sloss House is a university-owned building, it obtains its heat from the steam that the physical plant produces. The steam is in such abundance that it costs practically nothing to heat the building. This is the reason why the house is not insulated at all and still contains the original windows. Thus, energy conservation is not an important factor in this structure.

Functional Layout

The Margaret Sloss Women's Center, which now occupies the house, has utilized the existing space very successfully without altering the house's original character. The spaces within the current building relate very closely with the original building's intentions.

Aesthetics

The Sloss House offers ISU a rare glimpse of Victorian architecture as it appeared at the turn of the century. Its style is expressed by the arched window heads, the shallow hip roof, decorative support brackets under the eaves, the rustic brick, and the carved walnut chair rail. For the most part, the structure remains in a setting that is very similar to what it was when it was constructed.

Over the years, changes have been made to the building; for the most part, they have not detracted from its original character. However, the stucco on the north and west walls from the 1925 addition conceals the original brick and shows no sympathy to the original structure. This type of feeling can also be said of the smoke alarm system, fire extinguishers, and the fluorescent light fixtures which were installed in the early 1980s.

The Sloss House remains as one of the few good examples left of the old on-campus faculty residences. As time goes on, the razing of an old building to make room for new ones will continue to the consequence that some sense of ISU's history and identity will ultimately be lost. We must show sensitivity and care to these historic examples when remodeling, making additions, or renovations. If we don't, they will lose their original character and cease to be of any relevance to the past. The questions of whether or not to undertake renovation or remodeling of such a historic structure is one to which people do not give much thought. It really is an ethical, as well as economic, question. A lot of people think that the money could be better spent. I disagree. I feel preserving historic architecture, such as the Sloss House, is costly, but necessary. It deserves to be respected and treated with care.

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