

My Hobby

or

Be It Ever So Humble

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When I moved back to Hopkinsville in January, 1965, I had already decided that I wanted an old house to do over. For the first three months I lived in a rented house at the very end of Bryan St. From my house to the rail-road was not a very great distance and one had the rather pleasing impression that the train was coming through the bedroom at two A.M.

However, before I had become completely adjusted to that startling conception, the house that is now mine came on the market. I had never seen inside the house, but I was sure I would like it. And like it I did.

As I said before, I wanted a place that needed help. I knew I had found it when my uncle, in a tone of complete and utter disbelief,

Said - "I don't know what you
want with that old wreck!"
So myself I thought - that would be
a good name for my little nest, but upon
sober reflection realized that it would
give my friends the upper hand.

In New York I had lived in what was called a one and a half room apartment. (Whether it was the bathroom, the kitchen, or the little entrance hall that was called a half room - I never found out.) So - coming to a house from a small apartment seemed to promise space in abundance. All those kitchen cabinets! - what would I ever find to put in them? That problem was soon solved, and I have no idea what is in most of them at this date.

Let me say at this point that the house was structurally sound. The artistic temperament does not completely preclude all common sense. But the interior was what I had dreamed of. Wallpaper peeling from the walls and ceilings - unsightly large gas heaters sticking out into the rooms and vented through the metal fireplace covers. Here, indeed, was the stuff with which to

express myself.

I chose the same color for three rooms that I had used in my apartment - a sort of grey-blue which I had mixed. I painted over the wallpaper after having patched it

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as best I could. How easy it is to say that one painted three rooms. The ceilings are ten feet high (which I like), and although not as high as in some old houses, one does have to get rather far up on the ladder.

I will not take this account room by room, but I will start with the living room. There was what is called a cabinet mantel in the room. Many people like cabinet mantels. I am not one of them. At this time, the old Postel house was being torn down and I bought an older style of mantelpiece from there. Of course, that led logically to removing the one and installing the other. Also, of course, that meant trying to remove over one hundred years of thick paint from the other.

To the right of the fireplace is a doorway into the dining room. The wall at this point is set in to

a depth of ten inches. Around the doorway, and above it, I built bookshelves to the ceiling. On the other side of the fireplace I painted the illusion of bookshelves and a door leading to a balcony

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At this point I realized it was an absolute necessity to have molding on the walls a dado and panelled effect. Since I did not want to put the molding over the wallpaper I scraped the old paper off. I was able to count fifteen separate layers of paper on the living room walls. In a space about six feet wide there were forty nail holes.

An attractive feature in several rooms was tacks in the ceilings with strings hanging from them. Although this created a novel effect I decided to remove them. With all paper removed from walls and ceilings one saw what one hoped was not underneath - cracks and nail holes - the reasons patching plaster was invented.

An amusing diversion at this point involved an old wooden

Step ladder. I was sitting on top
of it scraping paper from the
ceiling when the ladder collapsed.
Aside from some loss of dignity
the only result was a bit of a
bruise on my posterior. I had
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landed squarely on my behind. Since she so seldom goes about unclad my bruise was hardly noticed by anyone.

You are not going to believe what creating a panelled effect a la Robert Adam (in a very modest way) involves. Just know that it necessitates designing, measuring, sawing, hammering, nailing, and finally painting. I was not content with just painting the molding the grey-blue wall color - oh no. It had to be picked out with narrow white lines. The same thing on the baseboards, and door frames, and doors. As a final gesture I painted, in blue and white, a medallion and glued to the center of the white ceiling. A neighbor (clearly not used to such grandeur) on seeing it for the first time, said: "Oh, that's pretty. Does it light up?" On being assured that it did not light up,

She lost all interest in it. The idea of something so non-functional did not deserve dwelling upon. Years later, on seeing it again, she repeated the question and received the same disappointing answer.

I am now in the process of doing the entrance hall for the fourth time, over a period of twenty years.

This time it will match the living room - all of that molding to measure, saw, hammer, nail, and paint. The reason, of course, is that with both rooms alike, and one opening into the other, the space will appear larger.

The first time I painted over the old paper. Next, I scraped that off and repapered. When that got dirty, I scraped it off and used a different paper - this time a vinyl strippable paper. I have suffered disillusionment many times in my life. The latest involves strippable wallpaper. Ira Gerstwin said it best - "It aint necessarily so."

The paper has been scraped from the ceilings in five rooms and from the walls in four. I say it has been done, but that means that I did it. Many people saw "I did

such and such," but they mean they had it done. When I say "I did it," that means there wasn't nobody there but me.

In the dining room there are over six hundred feet of molding on

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the walls - all of it applied with love and curses by me. The walls and molding are in two colors - yellow and a sort of shrimp color. There is also a medallion on the ceiling. This one has a chandelier hanging from it which does light up.

In what I call the studio, (where I have the piano) after scraping everything, I covered the walls with grass-cloth. Grass-cloth does not come prepasted. The memory of pasting and applying it is too much for me, even after twelve or fifteen years.

In the bedroom the paper resembles shutters. Shutters very rarely bend around corners, so there was much cutting and piecing of wallpaper.

The kitchen and bathroom have also come in for their fair share. I try not to let anyone see the kitchen, but it has received some.

attention (a friend unkindly said
no one would want to see the kitchen,
I have done that bathroom three times.

This project has also included
refinishing furniture, redoing floors,
making cornices for the windows,
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covering a screen, recovering two sofas and a chair, and in fact everything that has not required an electrician or a seamstress.

During all of this upheaval there were several students and countless pupils coming to the house every afternoon for piano lessons. I would work on the house as long as I could before getting cleaned up for teaching. One day I cut it too close. I had to go to the door to let in a pupil in a bath towel. (I was the one in the bath towel.)

She was a young married woman. I always knew I never had the form divine, but I thought her reaction was a little extreme. She came for a couple of more lessons, then quit, divorced her husband, and left town.

When I first painted the outside of the house, I did in brown trimmed in white. A friend telephoned one

day and when I told her I was painting the house she asked what color. I told her and she said "Brown? Do you like it?" Personally, I think it would be the height of eccentricity to paint your house

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a color you don't like. The next time it was grey and white. Last summer its grey and whiteness was renewed. I can honestly say I have never enjoyed any painting of it ^{much as} that one. Someone else did it. A painter working across the street said: "Your house looks nice. I don't like the color, but it looks nice."

Having never had any desire whatsoever to re-roof a house, I graciously allowed a professional to do that when the time came.

The back yard is my hobby in Spring, Summer, and early Fall. When I lived in New York I had visited on Long Island many times and still carried in my mind visions of great formal gardens stretching over many acres. Taking a look at my yard (which resembled the town dump) I thought it actually should be at least six blocks

long. One can't really achieve a
really splendid effect in such a
small space. After a couple of
years I thought that perhaps
five blocks would have been
enough. Now I have decided
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it has been big enough all along.

My first view of the back yard revealed grass and weeds almost knee high, a dying red-bud tree, and a really impressive trash pile under the bedroom windows. Some one had cleverly built a brick fireplace under the red-bud tree, but this had disintegrated - producing the same state of affairs with the tree.

After mowing the grass and weeds I set about planning the layout. I ordered thousands of old bricks and laid a patio and edged flower beds all around the yard.

At this time the old Winfree house on 16th and Virginia streets was being torn down. I bought four wooden columns from there which I put up on the patio and covered with a roof.

About the first or second year I did two of the most assinine things

I have ever done which was to
plant lots of hedge and ivy. I am
still trying to get rid of both. My
ideas concerning the yard have
changed and expanded just as they
have with the house. Last summer
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the yard had reached such a breathtaking peak that people from as far away as across the street came to look at it (if I promised to throw in some refreshment on the side).

In the front yard I took up an old broken concrete walk that went from the street all around one side of the house and across the back. In its place I laid a wider brick walk. This goes only from the sidewalk to the front steps. After I had finished it, I overheard one garbage collector say to the other: "That won't stay." I don't know where he thought it would go, but when I left home this evening it was still there.

I am an avid reader of mysteries, especially English ones. Agatha Christie's houses all have fascinating names, and I thought I would like a fascinating name for mine.

At first I decided on "The Old Whitley Place". I liked this because

I have never known anyone named
Whitley. A friend was so carried
away with it that she had a
thousand return address stickers
printed for me. She seemed a little
put out when she found that I
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had already changed the name. The next choice, and probably the best, was "Mars Hall." I really like this, but a Hall suggests something a little more imposing than my small cottage - in spite of medallions on the ceilings.

Summer before last I went to England. That did it! When I returned I christened the place "Little Whitley on Chester." Chester refers to the alley that separates my back yard from the apartment house that Chester Porta owned.

So life goes on at 208 Bryan St. If I were completely honest with myself, I would admit that this is no hobby; it's an unpaid job. The only thing that makes it bearable is that no one is making me do it.