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A long-distance love affair: kin restoring 1760 home here

After years of neglect, Speedwell Forge ironmaster's elegant stone-and-slate house is getting a makeover by tenacious California couple.

Here's the fairy tale: Five years ago and many miles from Elizabeth Township, a nice young couple dream up a plan.

Each year, they squirrel a little money away, saving until they have enough to restore the family homestead on Speedwell Forge Road, where they retire and enjoy many happy hours by the banks of Hammer Creek.

Here's the reality: The house, parts of which date from 1760, is falling apart. As last year's stormy summer blows through the county, the slate roof spalls, the walls molder and the furniture warps. Restoring the Speedwell Forge Homestead requires a much larger investment than originally conceived.

To avoid a money-pit predicament - replacing the slate roof is a \$98,000 project, for example - the couple decides to make the property self-sustaining by refashioning it as a bed-and-breakfast. Its history will be an asset, but restoration becomes more complicated.

The cost of the project soars. County and township officials festoon the couple's plans with bundles of thick red tape. Mom says, "Over my dead body."

At times the couple grow despondent. Tears sometimes flow. But they work on Mom, save more money and charm county officials.

And two weeks ago, after years of planning, construction finally begins on Gregg Hesling and Dawn Darlington's dream: Speedwell Forge B&B.

When the California couple began dating 14 years ago, Darlington announced to Hesling that they would be moving to Pennsylvania, where she was raised. He humored her, but the 35-year-old computer consultant had lived in California all his life and planned to retire to a small house there.

After a few trips to Speedwell Forge, where Dawn's mother, Barbara, lives in a small house opposite the historic mansion, Hesling saw how serious his girlfriend was about restoring the property and living there.

"This is something that she had in mind since she was 6 or 7" years old, Hesling said.

In 1941, Darlington's grandparents, Gerald and Kathryn Darlington, were driving down Lake View Drive when they spotted the mansion across the creek through a thicket of trees.

Kathryn was enchanted by the house and the landscape. Four weeks later, Gerald, who worked for the Hamilton Watch Company, drove her out to the house and waltzed her

through the front door. Kathryn was appalled at the apparent lack of manners until a grinning Gerald picked the housekeys from his pocket.

Before Darlington's grandparents bought the mansion and surrounding property it was a dairy farm. Before that, it was a stock farm for racehorses. But it is the property's original incarnation as an iron forge that intrigues local historians.

Nearby Cornwall provided a rich supply of iron ore, which ironmasters like James Old, who built Speedwell Forge around 1760, converted into "bar iron" and sold to blacksmiths.

Old's son-in-law, Robert Coleman, became one of Pennsylvania's first millionaires by manufacturing iron chain links. During the early stages of the Revolutionary War, some of Coleman's chains were strung across the Delaware River to block the passage of British warships. Together, the two men are responsible for the property's crowning glory: the Speedwell Forge mansion.

"The stone ironmaster's mansion is especially significant as a blend of early Georgian/traditional English and Georgian/Federal styles of architecture with very fine details," said architectural historian Barb Raid.

Raid has prepared the property's application for the National Historic Registry.

Gary Geiselman, who is restoring the mansion, said that he was "amazed" the first time he saw it.

"It's gorgeous, a real time capsule," he said.

During the 18th century the forge was a self-sustaining hamlet of its own, with farmers, iron workers, paymasters, and colliers.

Gradually, some of the land has been sold off to farmers and the county, which turned the marshlands into a park. The now 177-acre tract includes a wolf sanctuary, which was founded by Darlington's father, Bill, a paymaster's office, a summer kitchen and an ancient privy.

Since September 2003, Hesling and Darlington had been working on the B&B project from California, expending all of their vacation days flying to Pennsylvania to meet with county officials, engineers and contractors.

On their Christmas vacation last year, they squeezed 18 meetings into five days.

"Trying to restore a house when you're living 2,000 miles away and working full time is no easy task," Hesling said.

Darlington moved back to Pennsylvania this week to oversee the construction and put in some "home-owner sweat equity," as Geiselman said.

Hesling will remain in California during the 12- to-15-month restoration because they need the income his job there provides. The couple is not happy about the 2,500 miles between them, but he will fly to Speedwell Forge at every opportunity.

"If there was any other way to do it we would take it," Hesling said.

They plan to wed at the end of this year, when the mansion will be near enough restored to house their friends and family, as well as any family ghosts that may be floating around the eaves.

If recent history is any guide, the road ahead probably bears a few more potholes, but the couple remains determined.

"This is a dream. I always told my grandmother I would live in that house," Dawn Darlington said.



▲ Dawn Darlington stands outside the Speedwell Forge Mansion, which is being restored and turned into a bed and breakfast.