

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

A fond look back at the Fall Tour of Homes

Members of the Ladies Guild and Rev. John Hodgson promoting one of the original Fall Tours



The Fall Tour of Homes: 55 Years as one of Galena's premiere events

By Pete Peterson

The Fall Tour of Homes in Galena owed its existence to the fact that the original First Presbyterian Church had a wood floor in the basement. During 1949, a fire in the basement burned a good part of the floor. The damage throughout the basement was extensive and the repair estimate ran more than the cash flow column in their ledger. It was clear that funds would have to be raised but repairs would have to begin now. Especially the floor. That's when a member of the congregation, Ed Miles, ran the potential bill up a considerable amount more. He insisted that the floor be done in concrete. He admitted it would cost a lot more than wood

but it would last forever, and it wouldn't burn. He knew what he was talking about because his family was in the concrete construction business.

At least that's the way Dee Vincent remembers it. She was a member of the original Ladies Guild whose members tried selling antiques and blankets to raise money but the repair work cost much more money than these activities provided. Just about that time Guild members Gladys Ehrler and Angela Stauss returned from a visit to Natchez, Mississippi where they had toured several ante-bellum plantation mansions. The two ladies described their experience and asked, "Why

don't we open up some of the lovely old homes in Galena to the public?" The committee said, "Why not?"

That committee consisted of Betty Hudson, Angeline Stauss, Elizabeth Rowley, Velda Brickley and Gladys Ehrler. The meeting was in Elizabeth Rowley's apartment over the First National Bank on Main Street, back in 1949, the year before the first event.

It was not a difficult effort to line up nine houses whose owners agreed to participate in the plan which would allow a few dozen strangers to walk through their house while several members of the church would explain its history. The First Presbyterian

Church building, which is the oldest continuously-used church in the Old Northwest Territory, was also included in the Tour. “We had no idea if anyone would come,” said Dee.

But somehow a number of newspapers from Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois — including the *Chicago Tribune* — heard about the plan and sent reporters out to interview the ladies of the Guild. And, on the weekend of September 23/24, 1950, more than 1,500 people came to Galena to view the homes. The cost of the Tour was \$3 per person. This was considerably less than the \$12 cost of visiting four homes charged during the last years of the Tour. However, you might also remember that, with gasoline being 29 cents a gallon back then, a buck went lots further than it does today.

The original plan was to promote the Fall Tour of Homes as a one-time event but it had gone so well that everyone agreed to try for two...then three.

Each of the ladies who worked in their assigned homes, describing the furnishings and points of interest in their specific rooms, wore long, period gowns to match those worn by the early Galena residents. For the first tour, Betty Hudson wore a long, black gown that belonged to Hatty Sproule who lived on Norris Lane. She noted that, “the gowns may have been old-fashioned but they were sturdy. I only wore four different gowns for working all 55 years of the Tour.” And work is the proper word; each of the ladies, usually called guides, worked for two full days,

Even though the first Tour was especially exciting because no one knew what to expect, Betty remembers the second Tour more vividly. That was the year she was working at Virginia Fitzgerald’s Rock House, on Third Street. “I was in charge



Betty Hudson and Virginia Fitzgerald in 1954.



“We had no idea if anyone would come” to the original Fall Tour.

Dee Vincent

Louise Stromberg relaxes in costume on a porch swing at the Grandview Guest House, a Fall Tour home.

of greeting visitors,” she recalls, “ordinarily a fun job but on Saturday, it poured. People lined up under their umbrellas and as I held open the front door, the water poured from their umbrellas into my shoes.”

Dee Vincent also participated in all 55 Tour of Homes events and finds it interesting to recall how it was run in the early days. “The first few years people drove their own cars and it was often difficult to explain where some of the houses were located, especially since most of the people were strangers in Galena. Our first solution was to let children, mostly boys from the congregation, ride in the car with them from house to house. They were often given a tip but the practice soon got out of hand. The big cars usually gave a bigger tip than the smaller cars so the boys all wanted to wait for the bigger cars. After a few years we hired buses to provide transportation and then the vans that we used later.

“A good many of our visitors came from Chicago on the train. At that time a train left Galena early in the morning for Chicago. Another...maybe the same train... called the “Land of Corn,” left Chicago and arrived here at 8:30 in the evening. That’s the one that carried many of our customers. It then became the custom for us to meet the train and take our customers to a hotel, such as the DeSoto House. There were very few hotels or motels then and often ladies of the church would put people up for the

weekend in their houses.”

Shirley Jahncke, then Shirley Herman, was a 17-year-old high school senior when the Tour started back in 1950 but was still a member of the team that put the first Tour together. She was a worker at the Grant House and remembers a male visitor who wondered if the house is all that historic, how come the house had modern heating facilities and electric lights? But his major concern was where Grant kept his whiskey.

One of her fondest memories was when she was hostess at the Terry Cole’s log cabin on Dodge Street. This was some years before he became mayor of Galena. The hostess is the person who lines up all the workers and guides and rehearses them with their narrative coverage of each room. Terry’s wife, Vickie, was expecting and planned to use the money she received for putting their house on Tour to help pay the doctor’s bill.

Shirley said, “Vickie and her mother worked around the clock to make sure the house was in perfect shape — and it was; even to the plants and flowers that Vickie borrowed from me.”

She dug them up at Shirley’s home and replanted them. To this day, Shirley can’t figure out how Vickie got them to bloom on time. They had a huge crowd that year.

Many years later, Shirley’s own house on Broadway Street was part of the Tour of Homes.



After 25 years, the members of the Ladies Guild needed a rest. "Quite simply," they said, "we worked too hard. We've had enough." Fortunately, another group of church members wouldn't let it die.

Nan Colin at left

Early Ladies Guild group photograph below



The project carried on successfully — a new set of homes on Tour, the last full weekend of each successive September — until about 20 years ago. It might have been a particularly stressful weekend that year but once the Tour was over, the committee in charge decided to abandon the Fall Tour of Homes.

"Quite simply," they said, "we worked too hard. We've had enough." Fortunately, another group said, "Don't let it die." Donald and Diane Burch had joined the congregation earlier that year. Together with Carl and Ann Schoenhard and Roger and Bonnie Wachter, they agreed to take it over.

One thing the parties agreed on: It was lots of work. Their first year set the pattern for the next half dozen years. Carl got the vans and always drove one during a Tour weekend. Ann was always

chairperson of a Tour home and so was Bonnie. Diane helped line up the houses and Donald was treasurer. He remained Treasurer through the final Tour.

Donald still cringes a bit remembering some of the things he and Diane used to do trying to sign up houses for the upcoming Tour. Like driving around at night looking in people's windows. Diane said, "We did this because sometimes a house looked very promising on the outside but was not on the inside. It was easier doing that than knocking on the door and after checking out the house, having to make excuses to the owner for not using it."

"We tried to have all of our houses signed up by the end of February so we could get out our brochure done by early spring," continued Diane. "That was my job, too. I was in charge of publicity.

Even to doing interviews for the radio stations in Dubuque. It seemed as if the job would never end. Donald and I would stuff envelopes at night after work, and sort and stamp and even number the tickets for each house."

"There was plenty of work," agreed Donald, "but lots of funny things, too. I sometimes helped out on the Historical Society's Spring Tour. One year I remember the chairman of one house pulling out the sign on the first morning of the Tour after he was informed that house was now for sale. He told the owner, 'No way. We're not going to sell your house for you.'"

"We had something like that on one of our Tours," said Diane. "While I was working on the brochure, we had this house on Magazine Street, where the mayor now lives, and when I called for

some information, the owner said, "I have some good news and bad news. The bad news is that we've just sold this house. The good news is, I'll give you the cottage at the DeZoya House in exchange. We used it and people liked it a lot. And the Banking House on Bench Street was also something else. After it had been lined up by a member of the committee, the house chairman, Marge Hospodar, looked at it for the first time and was staggered to find it had no furniture. So we all scrounged furniture from our own homes and furnished it. It worked out fine. A good number of people helped. The Tour absolutely wouldn't have lasted as long as it did if it weren't for Jim and Delight McCrea.

"We also did signs for the store owners to put in the windows promoting the Tour a month before the event. It paid off, too. We always had at least 1,000 and often 1,500 people each year."

You had to be at least 9 years old to work on the Tour as guide. That's when Jim Lander started back in 1955. He rode with people who drove their own cars. The driver was supposed to provide lunch because there were nine houses to visit back then and it took a long time to cover them all. They

were also expected to offer a tip. Otherwise, why would a 9-year-old boy spend the better part of a weekend working when he could be playing with the other kids?

Jim was a teenager when buses replaced the boy guides so he worked inside the houses and again received his lunch but these jobs didn't offer a tip. Except for the nine years he was away at school or the military, he worked for 40 years and in between tours, helped to line up houses.

Jim remembers a number of incidents, such as the time he was visiting a house after having finished his job as tour guide. "A lady in a long gown was working in the library of an old house, explaining the items of interest. One of them happened to be a well-polished spittoon. After she finished and we were leaving to move into the next room, a visitor at the head of the line picked up the spittoon and used it with a flourish. When we all looked at him in shock, he said, 'Well, that's what it was used for, wasn't it?'"

"On another Tour," he continued. "I was working as a guide in the master bedroom and just beginning my spiel when the phone rang and a

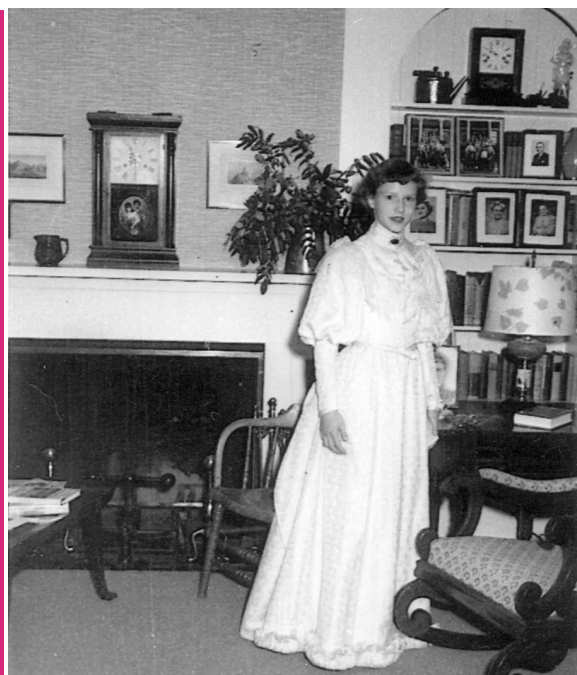
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Jim Lander

woman answered her cell phone. I stopped after she kept talking, waiting for her to sign off, but she kept on talking. The rest of the visitors looked daggers at her and after a while she got the message and stopped talking. After that rude incident we put in the brochure, the line: Turn off your cell phone.

"I was visiting another house where the guide was taking us through the last room in a beautiful house which was beautifully furnished. After she finished she asked: 'Are there any questions?' A woman said, 'It's a nice house but I sure wouldn't decorate it this way.' I couldn't resist thinking: 'But it's not your house.'

Fall Tour Guides
Among the many who helped give tours of houses over the years were Janice Runde (on the left) and Devonna Pieszak (on the right).



“On our 2001 Tour a couple weeks after 9/11 twin towers tragedy, I chaired a house and was kind of surprised at the huge turn out. It seemed that people were tired of watching the bad news on television and wanted to get out and enjoy themselves and talk. It was one of the friendliest tours we had. It seemed that the tragedy brought out the best in people. Just as [Hurricane] Katrina did.”

Kay Runde, who might be the oldest member of our congregation, was in on the ground floor of the Fall Tour. She remembers working as a hostess at the Katherine and Ralph Norris farmhouse out on Norris Lane on the very first Tour. “They were brother and sister,” said Kay, “and Katherine was our organist for a number of years. I remembered how excited I was. It was a lot of fun.

“I was house chairman the second year. It was the Tweton House on Dewey Avenue. That was a lot more work because you had to make sure you had enough volunteers lined up and everyone knew their lines.

“In the early days,” continued Kay, “it seemed as if everyone worked, and I mean two full days. But then we would have a party at somebody’s house to celebrate, after the Tour was over. We would take turns because everyone was tired but it was lots of fun.”

Kay’s house on Park Avenue was on Tour three times over the years. “I wasn’t a part of the showing but I wanted to make sure everything was perfect before the Tour started. The only real problem was with one of the porch pillars which was damaged. I decided to replace it but that was easier said than done. It had to be a certain kind of wood and after it was shaped to fit, it had to be hollowed out so that it wouldn’t crack. I found a



Dee Vincent and Hazel Hatfield selling tickets at the DeSoto House Hotel.

carpenter from Elizabeth who did a wonderful job. I had to do it again later but now I knew how.

“The store owners on Main Street cooperated with us by decorating their shop windows with antiques, especially in the early days. Of course, quite often they would ask us for help and members of the ladies guild would do it for them. In those days, all the ladies who acted as hostesses wore long dresses. Some of them had costumes made and wore them each year.

“We owe a lot to a few people who haven’t been mentioned. Especially Gladys Ehrler. She was chairman of the entire project for a number of years and also had her house on tour many times. Also Angeline Stauss who was a member of the original party that visited the plantations in Natchez. It was her husband who had the Galena-Stauss Hospital named after them. He owned a grocery store in town and they had no children or family so when he died he willed part of his estate to the hospital. We should also list Virginia Wise and Irene Larey for a special thank you. And Evelyn Patterson, who chaired the Fall Tour for several years.”

An excerpt from Pastor Jim McCrea’s full page article in the June 15, 2005 issue of *The Galena Gazette*, “Fall Tour Obituary” provides a proper ending to this reminiscence:

“Clearly, from the beginning, the Fall Tour of Homes was a community affair

and that never changed. For decades, it was an event far too big for the members of the First Presbyterian Church to handle alone. In fact, it never could have survived for five and a half decades without the help of veritable armies of volunteers throughout the community, who were willing to give their time in order to write publicity, serve as chair houses, give tours, drive vans, take tickets and on and on.

“All that, of course, is above and beyond that wonderful corps of people who provided the heart of the Fall Tour by generously opening up their private homes to public inspection year after year. Yes, we would always offer to compensate them financially and most of them accepted that, although some would privately turn the money back to us.

“However all were compensated with more than mere money. all of them were able to bask in the glow of the sincere compliments they received over their houses and all of them had the knowledge that they were helping the larger community.

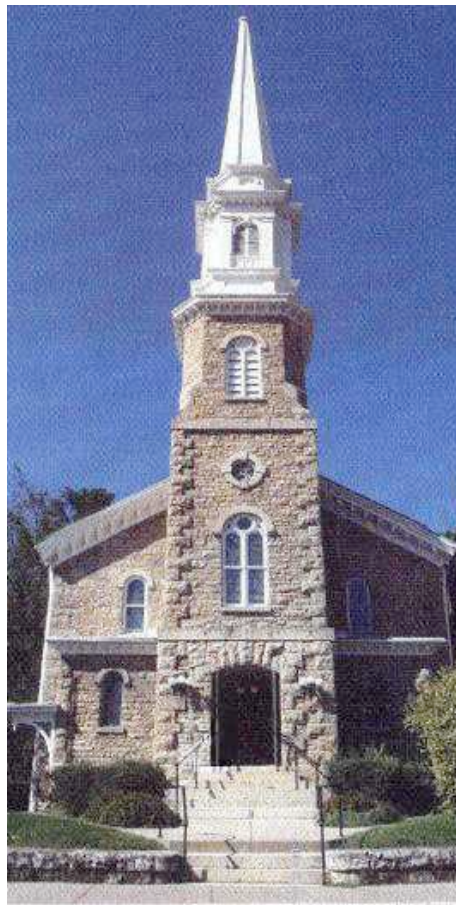
“You see, many years ago the Fall Tour ceased being about raising money for the First Presbyterian Church’s internal needs and instead became an opportunity for the church to raise funds for charitable organizations in the community. Although no comprehensive list was kept of the organizations who were the beneficiaries of the Fall Tour profits,



Preparing for the Fall Tour: Ann Schoenhard, Rev. Bill Harnish and Donald Burch.

among those who have received Tour funds in recent years are CHOICES, the Dubuque rescue mission, the Galena Food Pantry, the Riverview Center, and the Son Shine Center. Although our budget will no longer be supplemented by Fall Tour income, the First Presbyterian Church pledges that it will continue to financially support a variety of area charities. In that respect nothing will change.

“What will the future hold for the First Presbyterian Church in its ministry to the community? We like to think we have the same innovative spirit that led us to the creation of the Fall Tour of homes in the first place. so we are pondering several other possibilities for 21st century fund raisers. Which, if any, we will choose, only God can tell. But, in the meantime, there is only one thing left to say: Thanks for the memories, one and all.”



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