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HOMEFRONT

A VICTORIAN EASTLAKIAN
is the big find in this week's
Preview House
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A HOUSE OF *Good* REPUTE

The Wright-designed Rollin Furbeck House at 515 Fair Oaks has undergone dramatic renovation, earning an upcoming appearances on cable TV and a spot on the Wright-Plus housewalk.

By **JEANETTE FIELDS**
Contributing Writer

The Rollin Furbeck House, which will be one of the attractions on the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation's "Wright Plus" housewalk on May 20, has a knock 'em dead new kitchen and a colorful kitschy past. The newly revamped kitchen will be featured on the "New Spaces" show on the Home and Garden Television channel in March. As for the house's past history, John Thorpe says "it's probably not as shocking as some people have said."

The story was circulated by past owners and former neighbors that the house once was a bordello. "That was not true," says Thorpe, a restoration architect in Oak Park. "A former owner in the '50s was a



The family nook: Lauren, Tom, Debbie and Michael Abrahamson in the newly restored inglenook.

that the former owners, the Ryans, had removed the exterior paint from the brick and stucco, and had the original colors analyzed by Robert Furhoff, a paint expert. They plan

Madame, and some of the girls may have lived here—they had to live somewhere—but the house was never a bordello. Yes, there was flocked red wallpaper, but that was the owner's taste. Oak Park neighbors and the village would never have allowed a house of ill repute to operate here."

Tom Abrahamson and his wife Debbie bought the 1897 house at 515 Fair Oaks Ave. about two years ago and have sensitively improved the imposing three-story Wright landmark. They and their two children, 13 and 10, are enthusiastic about the house. They are grateful

to use the original colors on the exterior trim, but prefer earth tones on the interior walls.

The installation of the new kitchen is documented by the HGTV program that will run on Thursday nights at 7 and 10 p.m. during March (the exact days have not been finalized; watch your TV listings). The actual taping started before the remodeling work began. The renovation added 150 square feet to the kitchen by incorporating the back porch into the new space. The architect was Darryl Drake of Glen Ellyn who worked with Lazzeroni contracting firm in River Forest.

"We wanted to create a new communal room where we would eat, socialize, cook and have fun together," says Abrahamson, who is the managing partner of Lipman Hearne Inc., a Chicago marketing firm. His wife, Debbie, is the director of ArtStart for the Oak Park Education Foundation. "We created a family room with a built-in entertainment wall as part of the kitchen."

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The Abrahamsons opened up the kitchen by replacing the north wall with an island table, seating six to eight people. The table's dark green granite top matches the green tiles the Abrahamsons added to the south wall, between the appliances and cabinetry. Designed by Motawi Tileworks in Ann Arbor, Mi., the green ceramic tile is broken up with a line of relief tiles molded with a leaves-and-berries design, recalling the Arts and Crafts movement.

The family also added a new mud room area, and extended the back of the deck so it wraps around the rear of the house all the way to the kitchen door. "We tried to be sensitive to the house's original architecture by opening up the space and bringing in the outside," said Abrahamson.

The cherry wood cabinets have leaded glass doors. "My aim was that in 50 years or so, people would wonder if this was the original kitchen," said Abrahamson.

The TV crew made seven or eight visits, photographing the house during many stages, such as demolition of the old foundation, the building of the new framing, the installation of the cabinets and the finished space.

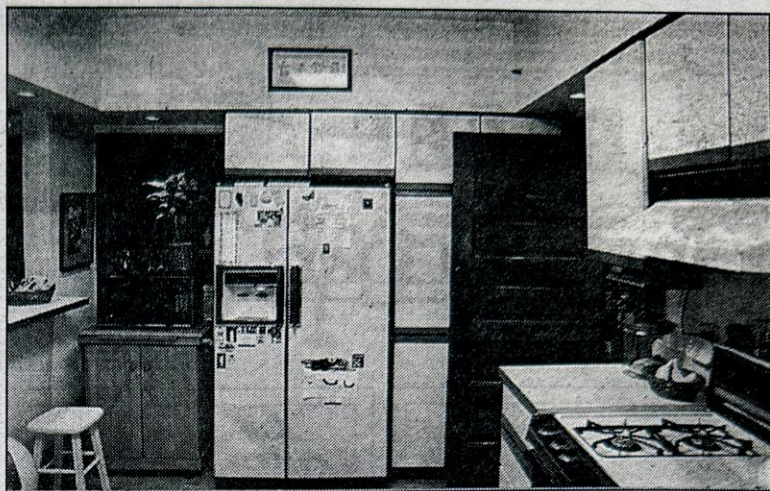
Blinn house) at 200 Home but never lived in it. The Maher house was destroyed in 1959. Brother George, however, lived in his Wright house at 223 N. Euclid Ave. for six years, from 1897 to 1903.

Wright designed the Rollin Furbeck House during his first period as an independent architect, "which began in 1893 with his departure from Adler and Sullivan and ends with his first true Prairie School designs in 1900. This was a period of enormous experimentation. Paul Sprague, noted architectural historian, claims that the Furbeck houses led directly to the mature prairie houses. He points to the rectangular massing, the strong horizontal lines at the sill level and the low pitched roofs with overhanging eaves. He claims that Wright would later abandon the narrow three-story center section that rises through the Rollin Furbeck house.

Upon entering the front door, one views the inviting staircase with its unique mezzanine, featuring a prow-shaped window.

The Abrahamsons started the renovation by removing all the old radiators, which were not original to the house, and updating the heating and air conditioning on all three levels.

"One of the most exciting experiences was the restoration of the fireplace inglenook by Espinoza Quality Painters,"



Before and after: Before the renovation, the kitchen was more closed off (above). The Abrahamsons replaced the north wall with an island table (below, left), and added green ceramic tiles behind the stove (bottom).

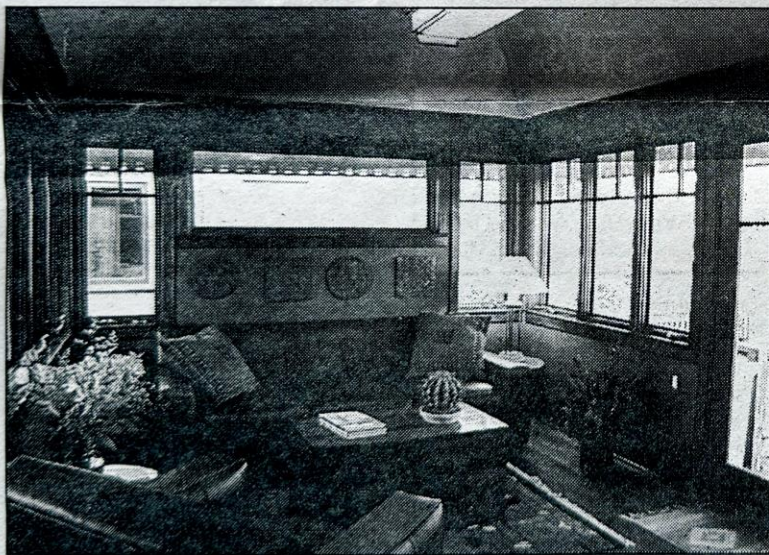
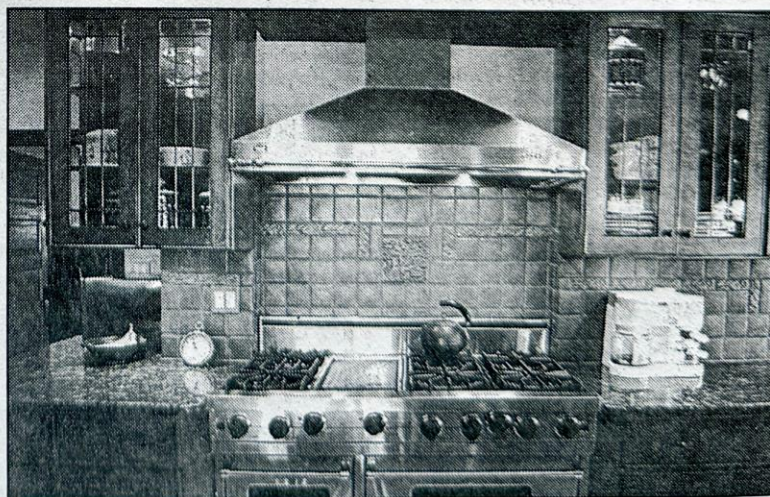


PHOTO © COURTESY OF TOM ABRAHAMSON

A new library: The Abrahamsons turned an unheated sun room into a library for lounging and working.

The first owner

Rollin Judson Furbeck was the son of Warren F. Furbeck, a stockbroker and prominent resident of Oak Park. His mother was Sophia Whaples Furbeck, whose father Reuben was a founder of Cicero and one of the first residents of Oak Park.

Rollin and his brother George both were married in 1897 and legend has it that their father commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design houses for each of them as wedding presents. Rollin worked for A.L. Dewar and Company in Chicago, a banking firm, for a short time before moving to New York and opening a branch of his father's firm. He and his wife lived slightly more than a year in their Wright house. They had commissioned a house by George Maher (the

says Abrahamson. "This has built-in concrete benches with hidden storage underneath and that, when we bought the house, had a plastered fireplace wall. There were many cracks in that wall that made us suspicious, so we finally began chipping away. Underneath was a beautiful, block-like designed fireplace with a concrete mantle, and a travertine marble floor."

The 25 by 20 living room was originally two parlors; the picture window was possibly the first use of this feature in a residence. Another early remodeling job, possibly completed by Wright himself, was the lengthening of the dining room, and the installation of the picture window flanked by two art glass windows, overlooking the back garden. New dining room furniture by

"Right At Home" includes typical high backed chairs and two dining room tables that can be joined. Art glass fixtures throughout the house repeat the window themes, and were made by Tiffany Art Glass in Chicago and John Curran of Affinity in Oak Park.

A completely new library was created from what was once an unheated sun room, originally the porte cochere. Working with

architect Daryl Dake, the owners designed a cozy, liveable area for lounging and working, surrounded by new windows and hardware.

This house, with its somewhat lurid past, promises a bright, fun-filled future. The current owners provided for large crowds, love to entertain and enjoy the spacious house, decks, gardens, swimming pool, two garages and its venerable history.