

Cobb house gets California lift



We pass them by each day, never noticing their grace and unique design. They sag in neglect and bleach for want of paint. So common, they seem expendable. So dilapidated, who would want them?

They are Blackstone's old Victorian houses. "You'd better have deep pockets if you buy that turkey," people in the know often say.

But a turkey to some can be a beautiful peacock to others—especially if they are from California, where a big house like the Cob House on College Avenue would be a mansion worth ten times what it costs here.

When Connie Barfell saw the Cobb House, she knew her search for a house that she and her husband, James, could turn into a Bed & Breakfast Inn, was over. And there would be room for her sewing rafts, her husband's computer, and plenty of rooms to launch her new career as an interior decorator.

The Barfells, like many middle managers around the country, have been shaken loose from their jobs by earthquakes in the defense industry, especially in California. Both worked near LA in the same government data base company in the aerospace industry. Barfell was the manager for 15 years, his wife was supervisor of a publishing division. Both could read the future as the budget cuts kept slicing away their security.

"It's much worse out there than you see in the news," Barfell explained while taking a break from some yard work. He was sipping iced-tea on the wide porch of his new new home and taking time to relax and talk. There was no deadline looking over his shoulder here, and it was having noticeable physical benefits, he said—and he has only been in Blackstone since April!

“I used to have constant headaches and upset stomach. For the last month, I’ve not had a single headache, and my stomach has settled down.” Mrs. Barfell brought another pitcher of iced-tea, which she put next to a new Virginia license plate still in plastic wrapper—the sign of their new life.

While the Barfells rely on planning skills and logic to steer their way through life and careers, they enjoy telling how they were blown into Blackstone by the unexpected push of a whim.

They were traveling on business in North Carolina when they saw an old house for \$20,000. Barfell said, “Let’s buy it and open a Bed & Breakfast Inn.”

Well, the house was full of termites, but the whim had enough strength to take them to Virginia. By then their charts were completed, and they had every detail nailed down.

Logic was in command, but the whim still had a say. “When Connie told me about Blackstone, it really appealed to me on a purely crazy level as a nice laid-back community.” Now there is a schedule, which puts their opening day in December. A $\frac{3}{4}$ inch sag in the house has to be fixed first.

“Vertical and horizontal integration is what we’re going to use,” began Barfell as he explained how they were going to transform their old house into an inn. But the jargon of the aerospace industry fell on Blackstone ears like a foreign language. “Uh, that means having other small business operating out of the house,” he explained patiently. He was going to run the inn while he wife built her interior design business

“We’ll be operating with TQM philosophies here... What? Oh, that means Total Quality Management...the ability to satisfy your customer!”

Happy that he had arrived at a common denominator in communication, Barfell then descried how he was going to offer JTR rates in the inn. “Joint Travel Regulations.”

And so the conversation went as the language of the high-tech world met and mixed with the iced-tea of Blackstone. On the front porch of the Cobb House, you didn’t need abbreviations that compressed ideas into short burst of sound.

There was time-time to scrape off old paint, time to plant flower, and time to let what you really wanted to do with your life grow and bear fruit.