

Tuggle house converted into English B&B Inn



First Guests

(Staff Photo By Ed Corbett)

While the outside of the Bread & Breakfast Inn on South Main Street in Blackstone still needs painting and brick work, a robin couldn't wait for the official opening this summer, as Michael and Sherry Walsh (shown here) point out: inside Mrs. Walsh's teddy bears wait patiently for less crowded conditions.

“Oh, so you live in the old Tuggle house,” Blackstone natives usually say when introduced to Michael and Sherry Walsh, who are opening a Bed & Breakfast Inn where Douglas Tuggle raised his five children more than 50 years ago on South Main Street.

Since the Walshes have not yet named their dream-almost-come-true house, they don't mind this small town's custom that insists on original owners long after they have gone. In fact, they love everything about the old house, which was built around 1902. Its

wrap around porch, spacious rooms with tall windows admitting plenty of light, and elegant wood work seemed to evoke the atmosphere they wanted for their inn.

Douglas Tuggle, Jr., who is now 78, took them back to the days when the house was young and the Tuggle family was one of the most prominent in Blackstone. His grandfather, R.W. Tuggle, had come to town after the Civil War, leaving his log cabin near the Grove, and built the Tuggle Tobacco Factory. Then his father formed the first tobacco cooperative in the state and was a leader in developing the tobacco industry here. His mother, Sue Armstrong, entertained senators, and even the governor once in their fashionable home. She also made Christmas cakes for hundreds during the holidays. Yes, this was a house built for hospitality.

And Sherry Walsh agrees, for she fell in love with it the minute she walked through the front door, never mind the need for paint, the hole in the screen, and the horrible black and pink wallpaper in what was to be their sitting room.

Now the Walsh's eight-year-old dream is near realization. While many rooms still need painting and wallpapering, the banister refinishing, and storm doors installed, they expect to open at least one room this June. Eventually, when the third floor bedrooms are completed they will have a ten bedroom inn, with the last two rooms coming from the cottage in the back, which was built to house soldiers' families during WWII.

Mr. Walsh, an Englishman, has only been in this country for five years. He met his wife in Southern California. When asked why he came to this country he replied, "To get her!" She was working for Brit Rail as a sales agent for Mr. Walsh, who was in England.

"But I fell in love with England when I was a child," she said, adding that she probably spent more time there than in the states. And she has the accent to prove it.

Creating an English type inn seemed to put all their skills and interests to work. With 48 years of combined experience in the travel industry, the Walshes plan their business venture like they are planning a tour for a client. Success requires that no detail is left unnoticed. And the inn will be a perfect compliment to their tour business, called Design A Tour, which specializes in planning tours in England.

But the inn also gives them the opportunity "to step out of the fast lane" of Southern California and think more about the process of living instead of just reaching some goal. They both love to cook and garden. Out back they have already planned an English garden so guests looking out the window will feel like they are back home... wait, what kind of guests are they talking about?

The Walshes see a wave of English tourists coming to America. Virginia is of special interest to the English because of a recent interest in the American Civil War—and what better meal for a Civil War buff than the battlefields of Virginia.

"Clubs there dress up in Civil War uniforms and replay the battles, and we're looking to get those groups over here to tour the Virginia battlefields."

"Britain is a very nervous country and they like to play it safe," Walsh said, his humor coming into play as he described his countrymen. "First they went to New York, then Miami, the California...once they were here they said, "Well, hang on, this country is bigger than we thought!"

Other changes in the world have made this flow of English money into Virginia possible. The cost of air travel has gone down, the British economy has improved, and "the pound brings a good buy against the dollar," he said.

The Walshes moved here in January and quickly became fans of Blackstone. They feel the town's English heritage and progressive energy will help their business.

They have even found a "twin" in England. "We have a friend in Sussex who lives near a little hamlet called Blackstone. A few cottages, a manor house and a post office is all that's there...but not large enough to have a pub," he added, which indicated it was as server deficiency.

Their search for the Tuggle House had been exhaustive and thorough. Last summer they visited about 60 properties, but none of them were what they wanted. Either they were too isolated or in poor condition. Ironically, "Blackstone was the first place we came to," Mrs. Walsh said. Betsy Irby, who had already received a permit to open a B&B Inn ehre had decided to sell her house. And the Walshes realized that Blackstone "would offer an opportunity to go back and see your childhood hometown still alive."

Having traveled the country for years and stayed in B&B Inns everywhere, the Walshes "know what makes us feel good and we plan to combine the good we've found in over 100 inns." Mrs. Walsh began to run through a list: beach size towels in the bathrooms, skirt hangers for women in the closets, fresh flowers in every room, mineral water and sherry in the bedroom to welcome the guests, and simple things, such as "a hook behind the bathroom door...and hairdryers too," Mrs. Walsh added, anxious not to leave a single detail out.

In one room was a fax machine and photo-copier so they can communicate with the huge network of B&B inns around the country. In the bookshelf, B&B directories showed inviting inns. "This is th fastest growing part of the travel industry today," Mr. Walsh said.

"There is a need among people today to feel that you are more than just a number," Mrs. Walsh said. And there are many overnight travelers who want to stay in inns for the atmosphere that can only come from somebody's home. "There is a very strong comfortable feeling in this house," and it was obvious that this is what she wanted to share with her guests.

When she talked about serving a "full English breakfast, there was excitement in th air. "An English breakfast is a much larger meal that you get in the states. You have English bacon (which is very different from Yank bacon), bangers (which is sausage), eggs, grilled tomatoes (with a long a, of course), bread fried in the juice of the bacon or sausage, and pots of tea...an English breakfast is a sacred sort of tradition," she said.

The Walshes are not sure how long they will have to live at 615 South Main before the natives stop calling it the Tuggle House. The past life of the house fits almost perfectly with its new function. R.W. Tuggle built the house with money generated from the tobacco factory that connected the town to European markets. Now European money will come back to Blackstone through this house, only now in the form of tourists, since it's Virginia history and not tobacco that's in demand.

But whatever the name the house goes by Douglas Tuggle, Jr., will certainly never forget its past.

"My God, if I could only tell you about the dancing that went on here, and the people that used to come through these doors," he continued, tear rimming his eyes.