

# 353 NORTH LIBERTY



American Foursquare  
Built 1908



353 N. Liberty · elgin

Associations with the watch industry extend to many area homes, and this one is no exception. In addition to prior owners with ties to the local watch industry firms the current owner, Swiss born Mich Barbezat, had ancestors who were co-owners of the Piaget Watch Company.

The story of this property goes back to 1865 and 1867 when Eliza Vail bought land for a farm. That land became Vail's Addition to the city in 1882, and ran roughly from Hickory Place to Park Street on both sides of Liberty Street. Lots sold from the Vail estate include the four Liberty Street addresses on this year's tour. One of the larger parcels sold from the farm went to Judge N.C. Sears and wife Laura in 1922. They gave their land to Elgin Academy and it's used today as the Academy's sports fields. The fields provide the "backyard" for three homes on the tour. In 1957 the Academy sold the easternmost portion of the sports fields to Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church which constructed a new building there to replace its older one at Villa and Fulton streets.

In 1906 Swedish immigrant C. Henry Carlson, a carpenter and contractor, purchased the property upon which 353 N. Liberty was built. Two years later he constructed the home. Carlson was a member of the original Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church, serving as a deacon. He and wife Tillie, also from Sweden, lived in the house until their deaths.

The Carlsons' daughter, Esther, and husband Harold Gustafson became the home's owners in 1937. A World War I veteran, Harold was a sexton of Bluff City Cemetery and later a partner in Conn & Gustafson funeral home at Park Street and Dundee Avenue, where Madison Funeral Home is now. Son Howard recalled his grandfather Carlson making wine in barrels in 353 N. Liberty's basement.

In 1941, Henry Biesterfield, a 38-year Illinois Watch Case Company employee, and wife Caroline, moved in owning the house until 1953.

In 1962 it passed to Roland and Doris Josephson, owners of a neighborhood grocery store named Joe's.

Years after Mich and Mary Ellen Barbezat bought the house in June 1974, neighbors told them about Joe's. The Barbezats had a wooden sign reading: "Joe's Grocery," in their garage and gave it to Joe's daughter.

When he was 8, Mich's family moved to South Africa, where his father worked as a watchmaker. Mich trained as a watchmaker there, and worked at Waltham Watch Company when it was briefly located in Elgin. He immigrated to the United States in 1963 and soon found his true profession in education.

Mich and Mary Ellen, now retired, met while employed at Elgin Academy. Mich became a dean there, and later a professor and interim dean at Elgin Community College. Mary Ellen, an English teacher, also taught at several District U-46 high schools. She has been a volunteer on all but one of the past Historic House Tours.

The couple loves old houses, fortunately considering it "satisfying" to work on them. Among their improvements are rewiring and reroofing; removing substitute siding; decorating the interior; renovating the baths and kitchen; restoring the front porch; and building new windows, a back deck; and living space in the attic.

During the early 1990s, the Barbezats and their neighbors to the south, the Bacons, each purchased part of the former Ann Street "turnaround" between their houses and expanded their yards into that space. The Barbezats appreciate the house's "good bones" and character, the trees and garden they created, plus the open space behind them.



### *Architectural Notes*

The American Foursquare is an offshoot of the Prairie Style and sometimes referred to as a "Prairie Box." This home has the distinctive elements of the Foursquare. They are the full-width front porch; two stories in height; a hipped roof; and a rectangular footprint. The one-story addition on the rear was added many years after the home was initially constructed. The couple expanded their living space into the attic a few years ago.



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