

653 Park Street

Is it possible for a house to exude some type special allure that leads to the same people residing there for decades? Maybe. One house with just such a charm is 653 Park Street. This fine craftsman-style bungalow was built in 1926 for Elmer and Alma Lemke. Elmer was 36 years old at the time and his job as a purchasing agent for the Elgin Sweeper Company seemed like it would be a solid long-term arrangement. As it turned out, he was right. He held that position until retiring in the early 1960s. An equally long-term arrangement began when he and Alma purchased this house. Elmer lived there for 51 years! Alma passed away first, just one year short of the half-century mark. The Lemkes raised three children in the house and filled it many-times over with memories.

The next owners, Ralph and Marrilee Schmitt, must have also been smitten with the home. They resided there about 27 years, from 1978 to 2004. Ralph worked at the Charles Schmitt & Sons Builders. The city directories in the late 1990s list his occupation as a craftsman. How fitting is that?

The third and present owners are Paul and Gareth Sitz. Their admiration of this house began shortly after they moved into the neighborhood in 1971, having purchased a former neighborhood grocery store located at 699 Forest Avenue. Many people will recognize this building as the one overlooking the Lords Park lagoons and pavilion. The store served both neighborhood residents and park goers for decades. But Gareth and Paul were not storekeepers. In fact, the store had closed a few years earlier and been converted by artist Tom Simpson into a private workshop and art studio, with the owner's residence upstairs. The building was just what the Sitz duo needed. While unconventional for a home, the former store front accommodated their wide variety of interests, projects and volunteer efforts, plus provided living space for a growing family.

Gareth and Paul Sitz are truly a Renaissance couple and an Elgin treasure. Both are now retired educators, having taught at Elgin Academy, Judson College, Elgin Community College, School District U-46, and School District 300. A sample of subjects one or the other has taught reads like a humanities course catalog. Some of these include art, (ceramics and photography,) drama, social studies,(economics, world and American history), many English and Language Arts offerings, gifted education, as well as both Spanish and French. The couple became known on the local theater scene after moving to Elgin in 1968. In addition to teaching acting and stagecraft, either Gareth or Paul has also served as an actor, writer, director, costume or set designer for over 50 local productions. The couple also play several musical instruments and sing. Their collection of books is enough to stock a small college library. Their virtually love-at-first-sight romance and marriage has been an artistic, as well as a life's journey collaboration.

During their years living in the old store building, Paul often walked their dog past 653 Park Street. From the sidewalk he sometimes caught a glimpse of the interior. In the early evening hours, Paul admired the warm glow of the house and its woodwork. One day Paul saw a "for sale by owner" sign go up. It was 2004, their three children were grown, and it was time to downsize. The decision to buy this house was almost instantaneous. The house had remained almost completely intact as built and in great condition. It was the start of yet another rewarding collaboration.

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