

# A Visit With The Bowden Sisters

(Editor's Note - The following is reprinted from the Fayetteville Observer of Sept. 30. The author was Sally Smith.)

WARSAW — Guests of Maggie and Nell Bowden receive a double treat — delightful conversation with two of Warsaw's most beloved residents and a tour of one of the town's oldest homes.

Entering the two-story, white-frame house with dark green trim on West Hill Street is like stepping back in time. Furnished with antiques that have been handed down through the family, the house is a historian's dream. A story waits behind every heirloom touched; each room holds a treasured remembrance.

An elm tree, with ivy creeping up its trunk, stands at the front entrance, and Maggie said the tree probably has been there as long as the house, built about 1845 by Wentworth Willis Pierce. Local legend says it was used as a Confederate hospital to treat soldiers injured during Civil War skirmishes along the Wilmington to Weldon Railroad.

In October, Maggie will turn 93 years old. Nell, 90, and her older sister look and act years younger. "We don't smoke or drink, and we retire early," Maggie said. Waking daily at 6 a.m., they usually go to bed around 9 p.m.

The two women are charmers, working hard to make newcomers feel at ease as they discuss their family home. The conversation flows easily, with one sister finishing the other's sentence.

Henry Bowden, the sisters' father and owner of the Union Seed and Fertilizer Company in Wilmington, purchased the house, and in 1905 he built the Warsaw Inn with 32 rooms and baths on an adjacent lot. The hotel was later converted into five apartments, and tenants live there today.

The family moved from Warsaw to Wilmington in 1901, and Nell and Maggie began their teaching careers in the port city. The family decided to move back to their native Warsaw in 1924. By this time, their father had died, and they lived with their mother, grandmother, brother and older sister, Sallie.

The house, a Greek Revival structure, is surrounded by a neatly manicured yard. "We have the best yard men in the world," Nell said. A man comes once a week to mow the grass and care for the yard.

A large magnolia tree dominates the view from the left side of the screened-in front porch. It was planted in 1924, about the time Sallie began the first of several remodeling efforts on the house.

The front porch, which faces the old hotel, was enlarged. "Sallie said if she only lived one day to enjoy it, it would be worth it," Maggie said.

"And we have truly enjoyed it," Nell added.

The porch features a ceiling fan and two Windsor chairs that belonged to their great-great-grandmother.

After their younger brother, Edward, married and moved out, the three sisters lived together in the family home. Sallie died in 1976.

Sallie, Maggie and Nell never married. "Honey, our father opposed us marrying," Maggie said. "He didn't want us to leave the family. And we had a happy home."

A central hallway ran from the front to the rear of the original house. Sallie decided to have the hall closed off and turn the back porch into a sun room with a bathroom. Two white columns were added in the hallway during the remodeling.

A brass billy goat sits by the front door. Maggie picked it up, laughed, and told how the family acquired the unique piece.

When their mother went to town as a little girl with her father one day, all she wanted was the goat. "It makes a good doorstep," Nell said.

At the end of the shortened hallway is a mahogany desk. "That was our grandfather Daniel Bowden's private desk," Nell said.

A family proud of their heritage, the Bowdens have three coats of arms, in matching wooden frames, hanging in the hallway — Bowden, Johnstone and Worthington.

To the right of the hall is the living room done in rose and gray and furnished with Victorian pieces. A piano sits in the corner, but neither sister plays. "That was Sallie's," Nell said.

Of the many beautiful items in the room, including brass lamps and several pictures of relatives, one is treasured more than any other. Maggie and Nell agreed that the copy of the Declaration of Independence on white silk, in a mahogany frame, was their favorite heirloom.

The Bowdens are descendants of Arthur Middleton, one of the original document's signers who were each given a copy of the document on silk, Nell explained.

Each of the downstairs rooms has a fireplace with a hand-carved Greek Revival mantel. On the living room mantel sits glassware brought from Scotland by a relative.

Across the hall from the living room, a sitting room has been converted into a bedroom and bath. One of Maggie's favorite stories concerning her home is about the trap door discovered in the room leading to a secret compartment. Sallie decided to have the chamber tinned and used it as a closet.



Maggie (left) and Nell retired 24 years ago from Warsaw Elementary School

Observer-Times Photos by JOHNNY MORSE

The bedroom suite, including desk, bureau and chest, is bird's-eye maple, a wood no longer prevalent, Nell said.

A plaque hangs on the bedroom wall recognizing the Bowden sisters — Maggie, Nell and Sallie — for their contribution to the community. "Our hobby? Why, doing for other people," Maggie said. "Anything we can do, we love to do it."

A glass-panel door leads off the hall to the narrow stairway, which has a sharp turn. "See that door?" Nell said, pointing to an outside door at the first landing. "That was added so they could get a stretcher up the stairs. It used to be a window."

When their mother was sick and confined to an upstairs bedroom, Sallie had the door added, just in case.

Upstairs are four bedrooms, a large bath and small porch overlooking the front yard. The handmade doors have two vertical panels.

After flipping the light on in the bathroom, Maggie, who is not supposed to climb the stairs because of her arthritis, said, "Isn't it the biggest bathroom you've ever seen?"

Before allowing the question to be answered, she changed the subject and pointed to a chair in the room. "This is my favorite chair," she said. "It was my great-grandmother's chair."

Although the sisters spend most of the time downstairs, all 12 rooms are steam-heated by radiators. Air conditioning cools the house in the summer.

The green, metal awning covering the back entrance is a blessing during a ra-



Great-great-grandmother's Windsor chair

storm, Nell said. The entrance leads into the sun room, which was originally the back porch, and is by far the Bowden sisters' favorite area in the house.

Today the room is a bedroom as well as sitting room, where the two look out the windows at the passing Warsaw traffic.

"Tell about the sun room," Maggie, sitting in a rocking chair, instructed her younger sister, nicknamed Baby Nell.

"This used to be a kindergarten classroom," Nell explained. After retiring from teaching in 1960, the two ran a kindergarten for several years. "We had about 27 children every year."

From 1924 until 1960, the sisters taught at Warsaw Elementary School. "I taught first grade, and Nell had the second," Maggie said.

When the two retired 24 years ago, the school presented them a sterling silver engraved bowl, which Nell carried in from the adjacent dining room. "It matches our flatware," she said.

The dining room, between the sun room and kitchen, has silver-gray wallpaper, gray carpet and mahogany furniture. For the spring and summer, white and printed cotton covers are placed over the chairs' red velvet cushions as they were years ago to brighten the room.

The room to the right was once a nursery, Nell said, but during the remodeling it was converted into a kitchen. Maggie prepares breakfast, Nell takes care of lunch duties, and they usually have something light for dinner.

On special occasions when the sisters entertain, they have a cook and butler help prepare and serve the meals. "Oh, we have visitors all the time," Nell said.

The sisters watch television newscasts as often as they can, Maggie said, paying particular attention to political happenings.

Proud to be Democrats, both sisters plan to vote in November. "We are surely going to vote," Maggie said.

Newscasts aren't the only programs Maggie follows on television. "I like the stories," she said, "but Nell doesn't care anything about them."

"I like 'The Young And The Restless' and 'As The World Turns.'"

When they are not entertaining in their home, the sisters get out and visit. Maggie does the driving — her license was renewed last year for another four-year term. Nell stopped driving two years ago, at the age of 88, because of poor eyesight.

The two sisters can be seen traveling in their gray 1981 Ford Grenada every Sunday to Warsaw Presbyterian Church, where they are members, or to Faison for an occasional lunch out.

Living in the heart of Warsaw, with the apartment tenants next door, a dress shop across the street and the sound of an approaching train's whistle in the air, appeals to the Bowden sisters. "I love it here," Maggie said.

Nell agreed with her older sister. "It's always been home."



The living room (left) is furnished with antiques and other heirlooms handed down through the Bowden family. The two-story house, a former Confederate hospital, is one of the oldest in Warsaw.

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