

Daily Herald

Big Picture Local Focus

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History is what gives lives, towns roots

Personal and community histories, that's what a place is all about. It's why we find some places more interesting than others, especially the kind of places you love to call home.

It is the stories of Elgin that have taken my heart, given roots to our children and led us to boast about our town — its people and amazing history.

My husband's employment brought us to the area 25 years ago, and while his job was a given, the house we looked for might have been found anywhere in the northwest suburbs. Our experience with Midwest river towns had been exceptional; they seemed to unfold unique, vibrant atmospheres.

Thrilled to happen on Elgin, we found it a standout among other more ordinary locales.

With deep historical roots, it offered a rich variety of housing stock, incredible landmarks, a promising waterfront — and, most critically, people interested in the structures that tell the personal stories of those who lived here before us.

We found scattered about the art deco tower, a most unusual church (designed with a watch in mind), a magnificent cupola atop Old Main, proud and handsome fire barns, a watch factory observatory, the jewel crowning Lords Park lagoon. And, yes, a grand brick building of national fame for its publications: D.C. Cook.

That private residences and downtown businesses have successfully made wonderful, adaptive reuse of old structures is living proof that the future of the Cook building and other historic treasures deserve deliberate community consideration.

As with the Lord's Park Pavilion, second thoughts, painstaking restoration, additional efforts and monies have often given new life to a structure already steeped in memories, readying it to make more.

Many are concerned that the future of the 1901 Cook building is hanging in the balance; it seems likely to become yet another remnant in the march of development.

And while most support economic growth, we also realize that sustainable economic growth is what really counts.

This landmark represents a rich piece of Elgin's history and can be successfully adapted for new uses — to serve the future and let stand the personal histories it reflects.

Our foresight as a community has not always been perfect. Most agree that the Elgin Watch Factory and Borden Condensing Plant were one-of-a-kind structures with adaptive possibilities, but time and money superceded their preservation.

Razing these structures "in the name of progress" caused latter generations to bury their

heads in their hands and groan.

Our children now talk about returning to Elgin, but would do so for the very reasons we were so taken by this town on the river — with an eye on an old warehouse for a recording studio, an old storefront for a bakery or a historic home for family.

Some river towns fade because those who inherit the treasure are not paying close enough attention.

What makes Elgin unique is that enough people value the historic places and the personal stories they represent.

Old photos and letters reveal much about the past of a place, but its structures are the living legends that inspire and help its members to create new personal histories.

What remains standing is unique to Elgin.

Whatever it may demand, it's our responsibility to honor and celebrate it, for ourselves and perhaps for children who may reinvent our collective future with their personal histories.

Lucy Elliott

Elgin

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