

Ever Seen An Octagonal Brick Home?

In the 1850's Orson Spire Fowler championed the building of octagonal houses as being cheaper to build, having 20 percent more space around the perimeter, being easier to heat and cool, and in general providing a "healthier" environment with good air circulation. A few thousand octagonal houses were built over the next few decades, mostly in the Midwest and parts of Canada. It's estimated that about 2,000 of those houses are still standing.

Mike and Marie Brockway live in one of them in Homer, Mich. The fifth generation home has gone through extensive interior remodeling, but the brick exterior looks pretty much as it did when it was built more than 150 years ago.

Each of the 8 walls is 22 ft. long. The house has 14 rooms, two stories and an attic with 5-ft. eaves. The windows are original.

"I was born in the same room my dad was born in," Brockway says. "One of the reasons the structure has stayed in good condition is because it's built on a gravel and clay

foundation with field stone basement walls."

His predecessors owned a brick kiln and made a living making bricks, farming and doing other types of work. Brockway says his ancestors were adventurous and always open to new ideas. The building actually has three brick walls (totaling 16 in. thick) with air spaces in between. The interior wall is plastered.

Fowler's design had a flat roof to collect rainwater into built-in cisterns. Flues, air ducts and even speaking tubes were built into the thickness of the walls.

Brockway notes that the house stays fairly cool in the summer.

"We'd like to hear from anyone else with a brick octagonal home," Brockway says.

He's found concrete and wood octagonal homes in his area, but not brick.

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Mike and Marie Brockway of Homer, Mich., live in this octagonal brick home. The brick exterior looks much as it did when it was built more than 150 years ago.

"Mini" Antique Steam Tractor

"I drive it in parades at antique tractor shows and have won several awards. I enjoy giving my grandkids rides on it," says Doug Schiller of Belvidere, Ill., who built a miniature antique steam tractor out of an old Sears garden tractor and scrap parts.

The tractor is powered by an 8 hp Briggs & Stratton engine and is complete with flywheels, fake pressure gauges, a variety of emblems, and 4 loud air horns. A tall, curved metal roof protects the operator.

"I didn't use plans to build the tractor to scale, but just pieced it together as I went along," says Schiller, who also built a 2-wheeled trailer to pull behind the tractor.

He bought the 1960 tractor at a scrap yard without an engine or hood. He mounted a Sears 30-gal. air compressor tank on front and built a sheet metal box that mounts behind it. A 2-ft. long, 5-in. dia. aluminum smoke stack, made from an oxygen tank off a medical wheelchair, mounts on the tank. A large pressure gauge off an old steam tank mounts on the box, with a smaller gauge on front of the tank. The front grill is original to the garden tractor but is turned upside down, with a "door knocker" emblem mounted on it.

A battery-operated fan, mounted inside the

box, blows heat through a screen on top of the box to keep the engine cool. "I added the fan after the box got so hot that gas in the fuel line started boiling, which caused the engine to quit running. I also wrapped heat-resistant insulation around the smoke stack to help keep the engine cool," says Schiller.

The tractor has a total of 4 air horns, which operate off 2 separate systems. Two horns are operated by a fire extinguisher filled with air pumped in from the air compressor tank; and the other horns connect to a battery-operated air compressor.

"I pull on a handle connected to a throttle cable that activates the fire extinguisher, and I use a toggle switch to operate an electric pump that operates the air compressor tank," says Schiller. "I can blow one air horn or the other, or operate both horns at the same time. When I blow the horns people can hear me coming from a long way off. The tractor is loud, too. I put a muffler inside the smoke stack, but it's located toward the bottom so the engine's noise bellows back out the top."

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Doug Schiller built this mini antique steam tractor out of an old Sears garden tractor. He also built a 2-wheeled trailer to pull behind the tractor.



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Outhouse "Historians"

Frieda Nowland finds it a little strange that after "50 years of good Christian ministry" her retired pastor husband, Ron, is likely to be remembered for his knowledge of outhouses. Then again, it was his idea.

The LaCrosse, Wis., couple was brainstorming with six other people for topics for the Sunday programs at the local Norskedalen Nature & Heritage Center when Ron suggested that collecting stories about outhouses and how they are an important part of human history.

After doing a lot of research and putting together a PowerPoint presentation, the Nowlands gave their first outhouse talk in 2000. Since then, they've repeated it nearly 70 times.

"There's never been a program we've done that elicits such a response," Frieda says.

Those who invite them are typically senior citizens, or church or historical society groups. The Nowlands were nervous when asked to present to their largest audience of about 400 in Caledonia, Minn., at a Ford anniversary event with vintage car collectors.

"The response was fantastic," Frieda recalls.

Outhouses were important in helping stop the plague, she points out, and there's interesting world history about them. Referenced as water closets in other countries, Nowland's PowerPoint photos include a 3,000-year-old 30-hole marble public toilet in Turkey. He also has a photo of a three-story outhouse attached to an apartment building in St. Paul, Minn. -- with the holes offset, of course.

The Nowlands and their daughter take photos of outhouses they discover while traveling, to add to the collection.

As they speak to different groups, the couple picks up stories from the audience, plus an occasional piece of memorabilia.

They've been given a small outhouse made of barn boards, toilet-shaped salt and pepper shakers, and even peach papers -- the tissues used to wrap each peach that years ago were a welcome upgrade from catalog pages.

Humor is a big part of the presentation. Consider, for example, the story of English



Ron and Frieda Nowland are known for their knowledge of outhouses. They collect stories, take photos, and also give talks.

plumber Thomas Crapper. Though he didn't invent the flush toilet as some myths suggest, he did help make them popular. And his name has never been forgotten.

Making presentations is a hobby and not a business for the Nowlands. They're open to inquiries from groups about speaking at their

events if it's nearby or fits in with their travel plans.

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