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Belle Mina: A Gentle, Measured Way of Life

by
Toby Sewell

When asked to write about what it is like to live in a historic home, I thought, “Well, this shouldn’t be too hard. At least I’ll be describing something that I know a little bit about.” However, having reflected on the matter, I realize that, although we moved into Belle Mina Hall nine years ago, I don’t “live” here yet. We’re still settling in. It’s that way with old houses. There is no time to “live” because there is always something that needs to be done!

We moved into Belle Mina from a house that we had designed and built ourselves. It was my “dream house” and had a closet for everything, central vacuuming, electrical outlets everywhere, and all the modern conveniences. It was a real shock to accept the reality of living in a house that was built in 1826 and had one closet downstairs. There is also an aura that hovers over these old houses that makes them have a spirit of their own. We found ourselves whispering to one another as we tiptoed around. All in all, it was an overwhelming move.

Like many other naive families jumping into the old home game, we thought we would move in and do nothing to the house for a year. We would take our time, recover from the move itself, and then proceed at our pace to do whatever we decided to do to the house. That plan went out the window the day we moved in when the door knob came off in my hand when I tried to lock up for the night. This began the steady stream of workmen who paraded through here for a year.

We started with the locksmith because every door used a different key. I literally was handed a “wad of keys” when we moved in. I still haven’t discovered what some of them unlock, but I am guarding them fiercely because I have learned to expect the unexpected. We progressed from the locksmith to the electrician,
after we learned the hard way that you can’t turn on any outside lights and use the oven at the same time. You also can’t turn on the microwave oven and use a hair dryer in any upstairs bathroom. To say that the house was wired creatively is an understatement.

While the workmen came and went, I was busy purchasing all the items we needed to “adjust” to living in an old house. I bought miles and miles of heavy duty extension cords because no room had more than two electrical outlets. I bought flashlights, candles, and lanterns because the power went out every time the wind blew. To me, the most important thing I bought was a chain saw! Overgrown bushes and too many trees had blocked any ray of sunlight that tried to come into the house. We lived in perpetual gloom. I soon chain-sawed my way to freedom and things were better after that.

I soon learned that old houses don’t give up their secrets easily. Not knowing where your septic tank is can be tricky! Also, trying to discern the “ins” and “outs” of two completely different heating and cooling systems would baffle an engineer. We have to buy air filters in four different states. Some of these sizes are so hard to find that it is necessary to have them custom made. I’ll admit that I had dreamed of some day owning custom made shoes or clothes, but NOT air conditioner filters! My war with the house continued for the rest of the year. My son finally brought me to my senses as he witnessed by frustration in trying to “whip” the house into shape. “Mom, he said, “this house has been here nearly two hundred years. It’s always going to win. Relax and try to enjoy it.”

I have tried to take his advice. I have accepted the fact that I can only have telephone jacks where the house will let the phone man drill through her two-foot thick brick walls. I have learned that you can get clean with very little water pressure. I have learned how to change a light bulb in a fixture that hangs in the center of a two-story stairwell. In other words, I have learned to adjust to the rhythm and feeling of the house, and it has made all the difference in the world. I now concentrate on the goose bumps I get on my arms when I walk through the large foyer that was a local gathering
place during Reconstruction following the Civil War. I marvel at the work it must have been to cook large meals using the open fireplace in the old kitchen. I can imagine trying to bake cakes, pies, and breads in the bee hive oven. I stand by the window in my bedroom and look over the tree tops into cotton fields that must look the same way today as they did a hundred years ago. A gentle, measured way of life existed here. I can feel it.

“A gentle, measured way of life;”

Excerpts from the Diary of Daniel Hundley—1858

**Wednesday, April 28**

Went Hunting.

**Thursday, April 29**

Spent the day in the company of Mrs. H., at the residence of Mr. James Tucker. Had a quite and agreeable time, and a very good dinner. Memo: Another time not to eat too much when I have a good dinner.

**Friday, April 30**

Spent the day with Dr. Pickett, who married wife Mattie Blackell, a cousin to my wife. Nannie & Maud accompanied and we enjoyed ourselves very much as there were several ladies & gentlemen there most of the time. We rode home after sun-down, but before dark, and the ride was most delightful. There was such a May freshness and sweet balminess in the air—it seemed that all nature was enriched with smiles and breathed of happiness.

Ah! glorious native Southern Land!
Saturday, May 1
Went Hunting

Sunday, May 2
Owing to the illness of sister Mollie, and mother’s going up to see her leaving my wife no means of getting to church, I remained at home & kept the latter company. It was a lovely day, and we feasted on strawberries and cream—the first of the season.

Mother returned just at night and I am glad to learn that sister Mollie is much better.

Monday, May 3
Went Hunting.

Tuesday, May 4
Went Hunting.

Wednesday, May 5
Went Hunting.

Thursday, May 6
According to Southern fashion we had a houseful of company today, who remained all day. I had in consequence to remain at home, tho I cannot say as pleasantly as I could have wished for, the reason that I have grown too fond of out-door life to be in-doors a whole day…

Friday, May 7
Went with Nannie & Maud to see Mrs. Clarissa Toney, a wealthy widow lady, a Christian, and one of the best friends I have.

We spent a most agreeable day, with a few exceptions.

Saturday, May 8
Went Hunting.
Sunday, May 9

As mother’s carriage is now at the carriage maker’s undergoing repairs, sister Toney called by & took Nannie and myself to church. We first attended the meeting of the Disciples, and attended to the breaking of the Loaf, after which we went to hear the Rev. Mr. Mitchell, a Cumberland Presbyterian. He was endeavoring to frame that a man is saved by faith alone. He read James where he says, “A man is justified by works, and not by faith only.” and he turned round and taught just contrary doctrine, and misquoted several passages of scripture in support of his false position.

I do not know when I have been so mortified at a minister’s dereliction of duty.

Monday, May 10

Went Fishing today, with eminent success.

Tuesday, May 11

Went Hunting.

Wednesday, May 12

Went Hunting.

Weather quite cool and frost was seriously apprehended last night.

Thursday, May 13

Went fishing and remained all day. We had about twenty in the party, and we had what is called in Southern parlance, a “fish-fry”—that is, we fried the fish we caught for dinner, and eat them on the spot.

Friday, May 14

Eat too much fish or something else yesterday, and in consequence was not quite well in forenoon. ...afternoon went to Mr. James Tuckers, in order to take a deer hunt on tomorrow with his son Charles.

Saturday, May 15

Went Deer-Hunting, had considerable shots but killed no deer.