

## **Albany's Keyhole House Gets New Owners**

By Jacho and Emma Eaton, proud owners of this intriguing house!

### ***Why did you decide to purchase and rehabilitate the 1891 Hale/Andrus House on East 1st Avenue?***

I was driving along exploring new areas when I first saw the "Keyhole House". It was so different from any house I had ever seen that I pulled off the road and studied the house. The first element that grabbed my attention was the "Keyhole windows." I had never seen anything close to this in a window style before! Our present home had a keyhole entry framing a copper hammered fireplace-it was a very unique element as well. I guess you could say I am attracted to the uniqueness and to keyholes in an old home. The fact that the exterior had stucco and it was still standing in Oregon was another amazing feature. The clean and timeless lines of the stucco were in perfect balance with the ornate carvings found from the eaves to the L-shaped front porch. It was perfect! It was a number of years and "stalking" before I was able to approach anyone and ask questions about the house. George Andrus – Jerry's brother- still lives next door at the age of 95. I had found two treasures in one moment and I was under the spell of both. After introductions, George asked if we had seen the inside of the house. We said no and he gave us the one room tour. It was one roomed because it was full to the ceilings. I really thought that my husband would have me committed after seeing the new "old house" I wanted to save. But, he didn't say no, so I took that as a cue to move forward. I didn't mention that the east facing exterior was almost totally covered by a combination of a family grapevine and over grown shrubs and there were bricks loosened on the foundation in two places. It needed a new roof, foundation work, and the stucco needed a patch in a few places! It was like being blinded by love. Besides we were close to being comfortable in our present home. I never met Jerry Andrus. But the more I learn about him I think it would have been difficult because he was a reclusive and introspective man. George is a private person but we have the privilege of spending time with him and just listening. What an amazing family!

### ***Have you restored other historic buildings and if so where? What did you learn from those experiences?***

We restored a 1930's house in the Monteith District just prior to purchasing the "Keyhole House" aka "Castle of Chaos". It did not need extensive foundation work, but other than that it turned into a full house renovation by the time it was finished. We also renovated a 1955 Ranch Style house here in Albany prior to that home. We learned that there is not much renovation work you can't do yourself if you really want to, and that there are some types of projects that we are better at than others. Quite often our skill sets have proven complimentary when we divide the project to suit our abilities. For example, Emma might do the demolition on a wall, I would install or change any electrical or plumbing that was needed, then we would both work on sheetrock or plaster and the final paint/wallpaper/tile to finish it. We also learned that just because you "can" do a job, does not mean you "should" do it. (See the selection below that offers hiring a

contractor as a tip for others considering such a project)

***Being that is a complicated project because it is a wood frame building clad in bricks covered by stucco, what kinds of special measures have you had to take into consideration to design the restoration plan?***

The type of construction technique used was not something we had encountered before. Most modern construction techniques are basically building a box with interior walls and adding other boxes as desired for extra floors or wings, then covering it with some type of attached exterior siding or covering material such as brick. This home is more like a house within a house. The wooden inner shell was built as a freestanding structure. Obviously excellent lumber in long straight dimensions was not hard to find in Oregon in 1890, so the wooden structure was built with continuous runs from foundation to roof instead of the stacked box approach in the more modern technique. Then the brick outer shell was built around the inner shell and the two were attached together using metal pins. The final masonry exterior was finished with stucco. With all of the foundation damage, our Architect recommended an Engineer to recommend an appropriate solution. Preserving the stucco finish on the exterior, and reinforcing the brick from the inside have presented challenges of their own.

***Since you have decided to list the house on the National Register under criteria b for being associated with a significant person, the past owner Jerry Andrus, are you enjoying doing the research about such a famous magician?***

As anyone that has experience with old houses can tell you, they all have stories to tell. To say that one person or story out of everything this house has been through is "THE" significance is like pointing to one snapshot from a photo album and basing a life story off of it. For the last 120 years our house has been the site of lives and families coming and going. The original builder experienced hardships that lead to the home being foreclosed upon, the Editor of the Socialist newspaper that lead to Oregon's "Initiative System" raised his family here, generations of families have shared good times and bad while living in this house.

Doing research on Jerry Andrus during his lifetime in the Castle of Chaos has been an interesting process. We did not purchase the property with any advanced knowledge about Jerry Andrus, and with no particular interest in magic. Doing the research on Jerry Andrus was not a focus for us until the decision was made to use his significance as the reason for listing the property on the National Register. We are fortunate that we have several sources for good information.

The first and best source has been our good friend and neighbor George Andrus. We purchased the property from George. This house has been the Andrus family home since they moved here in 1928. George has been able to give us first hand knowledge of how Jerry (and the Andrus family) lived and used the home for the last 82 years. His help and continued involvement in the project to preserve and renovate the home is a key to the success.

Another excellent source of information has been all of Jerry's friends and fans. There is a formal group organized as "The Friends of Jerry Andrus" that have a large archive of information about Jerry's life and his contributions to magic and illusions. Jeanine De Noma and Steve Bauer as the principle representatives of this group have been great about sharing the information, photos and documents about Jerry's life.

We are fortunate that there is a great deal of documentary information about Jerry Andrus available. As a prolific author of books and pamphlets about magic tricks and illusions that he created, there are many copies of his work available on line and in print to use as reference. Jerry was the subject of a series of DVDs documenting and demonstrating his magic tricks and illusions. Having this set to use for reference is helpful. There have also been two full length documentary films made on Jerry Andrus that are excellent sources of information.

***Provide us with some specific examples of stuff you have found while working on this project (i.e. were there any secret compartments or magical tricks still left in the house when you bought it)?***

The "Castle of Chaos" earned its title the hard way. After George and Jerry's mother passed away, the home became very much a storehouse and laboratory for Jerry's illusions as well as his home. The house was customized to fit the special needs of a magician, inventor and collector.

Additions such as a hand operated crane mounted on a boom that swung out over the staircase from the second floor, and a specialized audio/video communications system via a large cable run between the Castle of Chaos and George's home next door are just two unique features of the house. Unfortunately through the years the additions and weight of Jerry's inventions and the large amount of equipment and supplies he collected, was too much for the home to bear. We helped George and Steve Bauer remove more material than I can estimate. Truckload after truckload left until it was useless to try to keep track. The foundation began to fail under the weight, and the walls began to separate and bulge. One entire room was taken up with a customized organ that Jerry continually wired with new "Features" that included audio and visual effects that were constantly changing. A pressure mat such as those used to open automatic doors in grocery stores mounted on the floor of the entry emitted voices and sound effects to announce the presence of guests. A pair of very large rapidly spinning electromagnets mounted under the floor, created an area in the parlor that appeared to defy gravity for metallic objects such as spinning globes. A great number of magic tricks, photographic material, and manufacturing equipment to produce his illusions were with the house when we bought it. George has given me many of the tools that Jerry used to create his inventions. I plan on keeping those with the house and to use some of them, such as the large lathe, to restore the house.

***On the restoration efforts side – what tips could you suggest to others that are considering a house rehabilitation? What’s been the most challenging aspect of the project?***

For others considering house rehabilitation, I would suggest trying some less extensive projects first, to see if you really want to try to do any of the “Hands On” work yourself. You don’t want to bite off more than you can handle, but there is no reason to assume that you can’t earn some pride, equity and blisters in doing some of the work yourself. Don’t be afraid to try some progressively tougher individual projects before you take on an entire house. Start with some less costly but beneficial projects to get a feel for what kind of time, money and physical commitment is involved with completing a home improvement project. Adding insulation, repairing/installing trim and crown moulding or building a fence are examples I can think of that most people can do without a huge investment in tools and equipment, and they involve many of the same principles you will use on larger projects. Work your way up to a full kitchen and bath remodel in stages before trying to tackle an entire house. Even if you find that the “Hands On” part is not for you, at least you will have a better understanding of what you need a professional contractor to do, and why.

That leads directly to the next most important suggestion I could give; hire a professional when you should. A professional contractor that you trust is the key to getting any of the work done correctly that you are not going to do. They can also help you to make decisions on some things that you might be able to do, but are going to be money ahead by leaving to them. Drywall is one of the things that I can think of that I might be able to do, but a professional can probably do in a fraction of the time with better results while I work on things that give me a better benefit with my skill set. If you are going to have the contractors do all of the work, it’s even more important that you find a General Contractor that you can trust to supervise the job. They will keep the job running correctly and legally with all proper code requirements and permits in place. Don’t expect them to work for minimum wage. You are paying a professional to provide an important service, and they expect to make a living. Indeed if you find one that is just too good to be true, they probably are. The same advice goes along with other professionals such as the Architect and Engineer to work on the original plan. If you do the best work on Earth, but your plan and structural integrity are not correct, you have wasted your time and money.

The last tip I can offer is to check with the State, City and the Landmarks Advisory Committee to see if any review work needs to be done before construction begins. This can impact your timeline and plan if you wait until after the project has begun to check with them. They may also have advice on resources you can use to help on your project.

For us the most challenging aspect of this project has been the financing. We bought the Castle of Chaos and started putting this project together about two years ago. Right about then the economy went into the tank and many of the major financial institutions experienced problems or ruin. Financing a project like this that takes a certain amount

of “vision” to see value in when banks are running for cover is not easy. At the same time we were putting this together, we were depending on the sale of our previous home to cover part of the costs. Putting that property on the market during the worst reversal in the real estate market in many years did not help make the financing look any better. We were fortunate to receive a matching grant from CARA that will help us with some of the foundation repair costs. Without that, I am not sure the bank would have continued working on the financing.

***What is your time frame for completing the project?***

If we can finally get the last parts of the refinancing and remodel loan that we have been working on for a year to close in the next month, we hope to start construction in late May. The foundation work will be the first and largest part of the project. Unlike many other parts of the project, we can't really have too many other tasks going on at the same time as the foundation work. We are hoping to finish everything by November of this year.