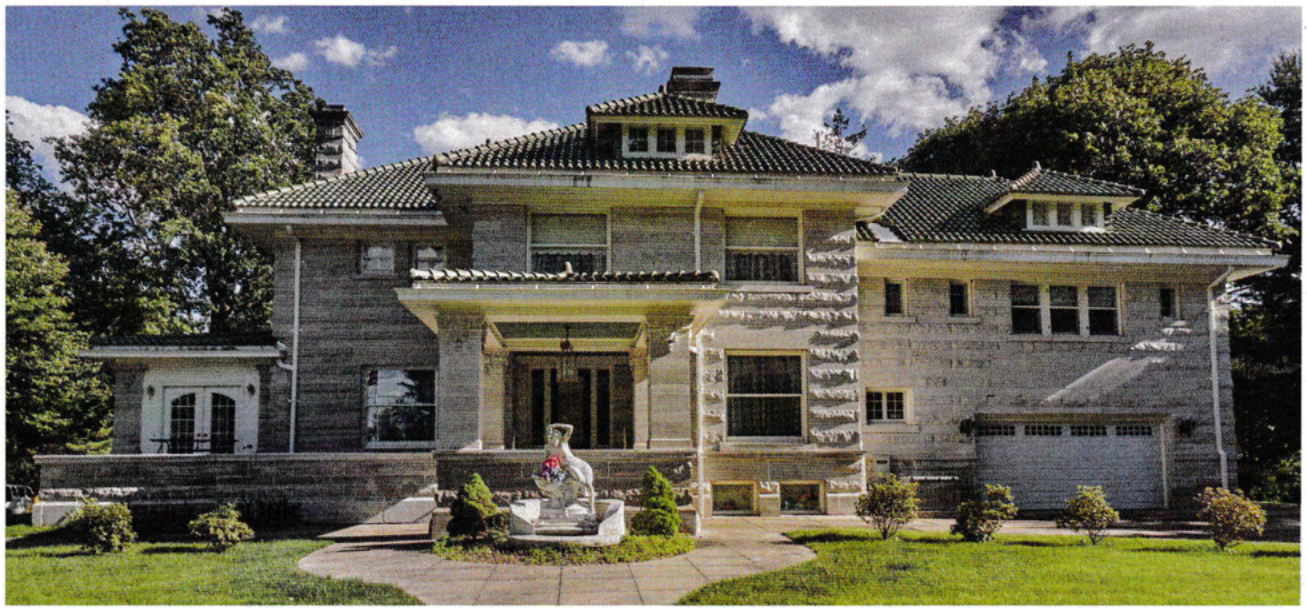




The Royal Red Room was one of the first two suites available when the Walkers opened the bed and breakfast in April 2003.

Gary and Virginia Walker purchased the property in 1998 and opened the McNeill Stone Mansion Bed and Breakfast in April 2003.





Construction on the McNeill Stone Mansion, 1282 C Ave. East in Oskaloosa, began in 1908. It was dubbed in 1910 as "the best built home in Oskaloosa" and is currently a bed-and-breakfast owned by Gary and Virginia Walker.

Bed & Breakfast & Romance

Enchanting history of the McNeill Stone Mansion sparkles with glitz, glamour ... and Cupid's arrow

The words "bed and breakfast" instantly bring to mind romantic images of Victorian houses with curlicue trim or stately mansions with manicured lawns. The McNeill Stone Mansion Bed & Breakfast in Oskaloosa, with its statue and wraparound porches, is the latter. But the romance the house imbues extends to the owners themselves.

The original owner was Wilbur A. "Little Mac" McNeill. Wilbur worked with his brother, Hobart W. "Big Mac" McNeill in the McNeill Brothers conglomerate of businesses – Wilbur was the financial wizard, and Hobart was the founder and entrepreneurial genius. Their businesses included coal mines in Iowa (the most well-known of which was the mining town of Muchakinock, which was the predecessor of the racially integrated town of Buxton,

Iowa, established in 1900), Colorado, Washington and Canada, and a Coke company. Seemingly uninterested in romance or marriage, Wilbur focused on business.

Until Cupid's arrow finally nicked him when he was in his 60s.

On May 22, 1906, he married Lulu Hamilton. But their romantic beginning got off to a rocky start when V. E. Hamilton claimed that Lulu was still married to him when she'd fallen for Wilbur. An "alienation of affection" lawsuit ensued and, despite the couple's professed innocence, Wilbur lost. On Nov. 12, 1907, the court mandated that Wilbur pay Hamilton \$20,000. (Six days later, Wilbur appealed the verdict, and love prevailed when the Iowa Supreme Court reversed the decision on Jan. 17, 1911).

While the appeal was underway, the newlyweds turned their attention to happier pursuits. Wilbur purchased five acres in Oskaloosa, and on July 3, 1908, construction began on their new home. He had a swimming pool, carriage house and fountains added to the grounds. Italian Ludiwici tiles were imported for use on the roof of the mansion. The exterior was built with Bedford limestone and coursed ashlar. For the interior, artists and workmen traveled from New York, installing brocade satin on the walls and mahogany wainscoting, frieze and cornices throughout.

The McNeills also added touches filled with personal meaning: They had "Aloha" carved above the fireplace in the solarium, perhaps as a loving reminder of their visits to Hettie

By RACHELLE CHASE



The McNeill Suite at McNeill Stone Mansion Bed and Breakfast.

McNeill Hoffman, Wilbur's sister, in Hawaii. The three monkeys representing "See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil" were sculpted in the coursed ashlar column near the front door, perhaps in defiance of the impropriety the McNeills were accused of. More than a year – and \$40,000 – later, the mansion was completed and dubbed by the Oskaloosa Daily Herald on Feb. 26, 1910, as "the best built home in Oskaloosa."

By the time the current owners, Gary and Virginia Walker,

bought it in 1998 for \$97,250, the mansion no longer lived up to that accolade. "The house had sat vacant for nearly 18 years when we bought it," said Gary. "The property was so overgrown with trees and bushes that you couldn't see the house." In addition, there were broken windows, no heat or electricity, corroded pipes, leaning exterior walls, leaking roof, water damage, dead animals in the attic and more. Referring to the reaction of the family members of another couple who'd

previously considered buying it, Gary added, "They [the couple's family] showed them that movie, 'The Money Pit.'"

Undeterred, the Walkers bought the property anyway, and nearly four years later, they moved in. Less than a year later, in April 2003, they opened the McNeill Stone Mansion Bed and Breakfast with their first two rooms, The Royal Red Room and The Far East Room.

"That same year, we hosted a Christmas tour," said Gary. The tour was a fundraiser to

raise money for hospice. Ten Christmas trees were decorated by hospice auxiliary volunteers, thousands of cookies and candies made from old-time recipes were served, and guests took rides in a black surrey pulled by white horses decked with Santa hats and draped in red felt. A thousand visitors bought tickets for the three-day weekend event, paying \$10 a ticket.

But that magical event turned into something straight out of a Hallmark movie for the Walkers. On Saturday

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Virginia's Zucchini Bake

A favorite with guests at the McNeill Stone Mansion
— even those who don't like zucchini.

- 1 c. zucchini, chopped
- 1 c. Club crackers, crushed
- 2 Tbsp. butter
- 4 eggs
- ½ Tbsp. onion, grated
- ½ c. milk
- 1 c. sharp cheddar cheese or triple cheddar cheese, shredded
- ½ tsp. salt
- ½ tsp. pepper
- ¼ c. Parmesan cheese, grated
- 1 c. ham, chopped or cooked bacon, crumbled or cooked sausage, crumbled

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease a 9-inch deep-dish pie plate or 9-inch square pan. Bring 4 cups of water to boil in a large pan. Add zucchini, reduce heat, and simmer, covered, until tender, about three minutes. Drain well into colander. Press cracker crumbs on bottom of prepared pan to form crust. Dot with butter. Spoon zucchini on top. Sprinkle meat over zucchini. Whisk eggs in medium bowl until fluffy. Stir in onion, milk, 2/3 c. cheddar cheese, salt and pepper. Pour over zucchini and sprinkle with remaining 1/3 c. cheddar cheese and Parmesan. Bake uncovered 35-45 minutes or until golden on edges.

night of the Christmas tour weekend, co-hostesses Vicky Collette of the hospice auxiliary and Mary Sexton, a hospital board of trustees member, had a special surprise for the couple. "That night was our 35th wedding anniversary," said Gary. Virginia, aided by her mom and Gary's sister, was handed a bouquet and told to go downstairs. Bemused, she complied, only to discover a pastor and flowers waiting. Vicky and Collette had planned a surprise wedding.

The gesture was extremely heartwarming for the couple. As with the McNeills, Cupid's arrow had caught Gary and Virginia unprepared. In 1967, Virginia, who was still in her teens, was clearing sunflowers from Gary's farmland when Gary, then 29, spotted her. Cupid performed his magic, and the couple was happy. But Virginia's parents were not.


"On December 6th of '68, we eloped to Colorado," said Virginia. "I made my own wedding dress for \$20. Gary borrowed a suit and his sister, Dot, stood up for us with the justice of the peace." The night of the wedding was Gary's brother-in-law's company Christmas party. Still in their wedding

attire, the Walkers attended, using it as their wedding reception. Despite being 13 years older, "They carded Gary and not me," said Virginia with a laugh.

While the Walkers' wedding was the first at the mansion, it was not the last. In the following years, they had numerous others. "We had one in the yard with 200 guests. And that kind of ended it," said Gary. Between the dirt tracked into the house and the wedding party running up and down the stairs, the Walkers realized that the mansion was not set up for large groups.

So now they focus on individual or small group stays, where they enjoy interacting with guests and strive to make their visits memorable. "We've had proposals here. Lots of anniversaries and honeymoon stays in every room," said Virginia. "We hope to make people feel comfy."

The McNeill Stone Mansion is located at 1282 C Ave. East, Oskaloosa, Iowa. For reservations, visit www.TheStoneMansion.com or call 641-673-4348.

Rachelle Chase is an author and senior business analyst living in Ottumwa. "Lost Buxton," a nonfiction pictorial history book on Buxton, Iowa, is her latest book. 



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