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The house, built on a mountainside in Central City by Jeremiah Lee in 1877, played a vital role in Colorado's history.



The living room, refurnished to look much as it did decades ago, accommodated parties and concerts of Mary Ellen Potter.

The society mansion of an ex-slave

By JEANNE VARNELL

FOR 92 years, a brick Victorian mansion has clung to a steep mountainside in Central City, Colo. Like an elderly grande dame in faded finery, the old square house seems lost in memories of past splendour and gayety.

The mansion is called Lee House, for a former Negro slave, Jeremiah Lee, who built it in 1877. Its rococo veranda overlooks the hills of the old mining camp. Its creaking doors open into silent rooms, crowded with recollections of a procession of tenants.

Now suddenly the house has a new and happy future. Leaks in the roof will be fixed; sagging floors repaired. The owner, having cleared title to the property, is restoring the mansion.

Living was spartan when the spacious house was in its prime. Heat flowed erratically from its three fireplaces. Its brass chandeliers cast only flickering light from kerosene wicks or candles. The drafty commode room and kitchen had no plumbing until after 1900.

Yes, life was hard—but the occupants were strong and determined.

Jeremiah Lee was born in Virginia in 1830. It was the custom in his day for slaves to adopt the names of their masters, and it is said that Jeremiah's master was the great Southern leader, Robert E. Lee.

Jeremiah Lee's bride, Emily Washington Lee, traced her ancestry to the Mt. Vernon slave quarters of Martha Washington. General Lee's wife, Mary Custis Lee, was the great granddaughter of Martha Washington, and it is likely that her slave, Emily Washington, received her early training in the same Arlington household as Jeremiah Lee.

The young Negro undoubtedly received his freedom at an early age. In 1849, Lee joined the California gold rush, thus getting a start in a long and distinguished mining career. Although Lee made a good stake in California, he returned to his Southern home to settle down.

For a time, the Lees engaged in farming in Missouri and Leavenworth, Kan. But in 1859, word of the Pikes Peak gold rush brought a recurrence of Jeremiah Lee's gold fever.

The Lees teamed up with a runaway slave, Lorenzo Bowman, who had worked in the Missouri lead mines and smelters. With Pikes Peak Or Bust painted across their prairie schooner, the Lees and Bowman hitched up their oxen and started west in May 1859. They joined thousands of gold-hungry emigrants, whose wagons extended across the plains as far as they could see.

Emily knew their lot would be hard. They passed many crude graves and disillusioned prospectors returning to the States. They pushed along faint trails, sometimes axle-deep in mud, through fierce winds and spring blizzards.

On June 20, Jeremiah Lee's wagon made its way up a steep canyon to the Gregory Diggings—between present day Central City and Black Hawk—8,500 feet above sea level. Prospectors were everywhere, panning the streams and building rough cabins.

Another Negro woman, Clara Brown—better known then as Aunt Clara—soon arrived and started the camp's laundry, near the Lees' first cabin. When the plucky Aunt Clara later returned to Missouri to bring back her relatives, the small Negro community increased by 16 members.

Jeremiah Lee and Lorenzo Bowman alternately worked in the sluices and panned for gold. Emily kept busy nursing the miners, sick with Rocky Mountain fever or pneumonia contracted during the cold mountain nights. She was a practical nurse and capable midwife. When families arrived in the Gregory Diggings, it was Emily who delivered many of the new citizens of Gilpin County.

The Lees were not only industrious, they were lucky. One Sunday night, Jeremiah rushed into their cabin.

"Emily!" he shouted. "I've found my claim! It's on Yankee Hill northwest of Nevadaville, and it looks like a good, rich vein!"

Sure enough, Jeremiah Lee had his first mine. Through hard work and prudent management, his business prospered. The Lees' first daughter, Alice, was born in 1862, followed in 1866 by a second, Sarah. The Lees now were respected citizens of booming Central City.

Soon, however, the Gilpin County miners depleted the easily mined surface gold. In 1864, silver was discovered in the Argentine District →

Photography by Orin A. Sealy

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The banker was astonished when he saw what Jeremiah had in the small chest

EX-SLAVE *continued*

southwest of Georgetown. Lee and Bowman joined the silver rush.

But mining silver was a different matter, as no efficient means had been found to smelt the ore. Who should solve the problem, however, but Lorenzo Bowman! William Byers describes his feat in *Biography of Colorado:* "Lorenzo M. Bowman, a colored man, who having had experience among the lead mines and smelters in Missouri, undertook the novel experiment and produced a good silver brick, thereby laying the foundation for smelting in the camp. During 1866 and '67 silver smelting and amalgamation works were thus established."

Lee had a new claim, the OK Mine. An 1880 mining journal noted: "The OK Lode forms part of the . . . Argentine Lode. The eastern half of the mine is owned by Charles Fish and Jeremiah Lee and to date has produced $100,000."

Lee continued to work his mines on Yankee Hill and Argentine Pass, always salting away some profits in a sturdy wooden box.

One autumn day in 1876, Jeremiah Lee strode up Eureka Street in Central City, threaded his way through the bustling traffic and entered the Rocky Mountain National Bank, housed behind the five French glass windows at the lower corner of the Teller House.

(Established by the Kountze Brothers in 1866, the bank had occupied a large frame building on Gregory and Main Sts. until the Fire of 1874.)

As Lee entered the bank, a kindly man with a handlebar moustache came forward to shake his hand. He was Thomas Hale Potter, assistant cashier, who had come to Central City in 1868 to help manage the bank. As William C. Ferrill in *Sketches of Colorado* later wrote, "Potter was always kindly disposed to those who were worthy and often in his quiet and unostentatious way has given a helping hand."

"Well, Jeremiah Lee!" Potter exclaimed. "Did you decide to put your money in our bank instead of your brown box?"

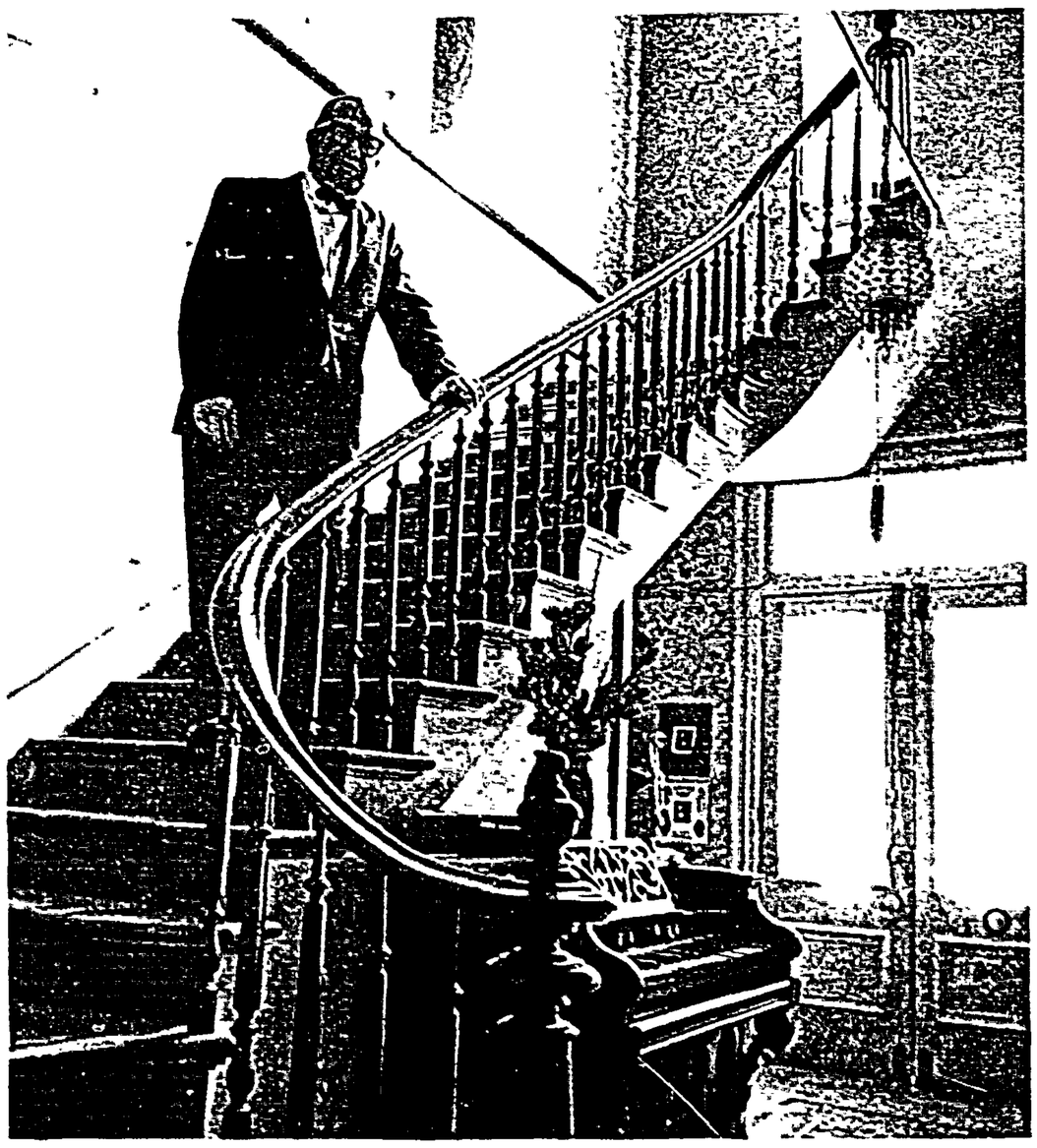
Lee grinned and said: "Something like that."

Potter raised the lid of the small chest. He whistled.

"There must be $10,000 here!" he exclaimed.

"That's right," Lee said. "And it's time I was investing it for a family nest egg. Tell me, what is a good investment these days?"

Potter tugged thoughtfully at his moustache. At last he asked, "How would you like to buy some real estate? Mrs. Potter and I have been



The elegant turning staircase near the entryway was one of the things that attracted architect Carl F. Bieler to the mansion, which he now is restoring to its original splendor.

wanting a house to suit our position in Central City. She comes from a prominent family in Maine, you know, and sorely misses their large parties and concerts. Here in Central, though, we bankers don't own our own homes—conflict of interest, you know.

"Would you like to build a society mansion, Jeremiah? Mrs. Potter and I will design it, then lease it from you for $100 a month until you recover your investment. What do you say?"

"When do we begin?" Jeremiah Lee asked.

No explanation is available why Central City bankers did not think it right to build their own houses. In any event, Potter, the banker, and Lee, the financier, found two lots at the corner of West High St. and County Road St., which Lee purchased in Emily Lee's name on Dec. 5, 1876, from Mayor Henry Jacob Kruse.

After consulting with a New England architect, Mary Ellen Potter turned the plans over to a contractor. Red handmade bricks were hauled up from Hooper's brickyard on Roworth and Hooper Sts. Double-strength glass windows were carted from Denver. Wide, spacious parlors connected by high archways would be draped to accommodate Mary Ellen's parties and concerts. There were three fireplaces with cast-iron mantelpieces painted to resemble Italian marble, wide bay windows and two sitting rooms. Guests would soon be greeted in the gracious two-story entryway, flanked by an elegant turning staircase and curving banister.

At last the house was ready and the Potters moved in. Red-haired and regal, Mary Ellen Potter soon became one of the Gulch's leading hostesses. The mansion rang with music as local musicians clustered about her square piano. The MMMMM Club, a culinary group, met monthly to taste the gourmet delights served in the spacious formal dining room. The *Register-Call* remarked in 1881: "The moving spirits of society in Central City are Mrs. T. H. Potter and Mrs. George Randolph, who have fed the elite of the mountains. To these ladies Central is indebted for her social amusement this season."

Then later: "There was an assemblage of youth, beauty, wealth, and intelligence at the meeting of the Social Club at the home of Mrs. T. H. Potter, who wore a drab and navy blue silk with irridescent trimmings, an elegant costume . . . Never in the history of the Golden Queen has polite society been so gay."

Gradually other bankers and leading citizens built fine homes along the street, and the Potters listed their address as No. 2 Bankers' Row.

By 1883 mining was again on the downswing. Prominent civic leaders were leaving the Gulch to conduct their affairs from Denver. In August the Potters decided to join their friends "in the valley," and purchased lots in Denver.

In 1884 Mary Ellen climbed the hill for the last time to give the house key to Emily Lee, who had lived all this time with Jeremiah and their large family in a small frame house behind the banker's home.

Potter controlled the Rocky Mountain National Bank from Denver until 1907, shortly before his death. Of his career, Ferrill said: "By close attention to business and being fortunate in his investments, he has become one of the prominent financial men of the state."

But the Potters' only son, Arthur, (who in September 1881 had started life in the magnificent Lee nursery) squandered his father's fortune and finally disappeared. Mary Ellen Potter spent her remaining years at the Perrenoud Apartments, 836 E. 17th Ave. in Denver.

When the Potters vacated the Lee House, Jeremiah Lee decided it was time for his own growing family to move in. Emily repapered the smaller upstairs bedroom in a gay red print. The fine woodwork throughout the house needed no repairs (the original paint remains to this day).

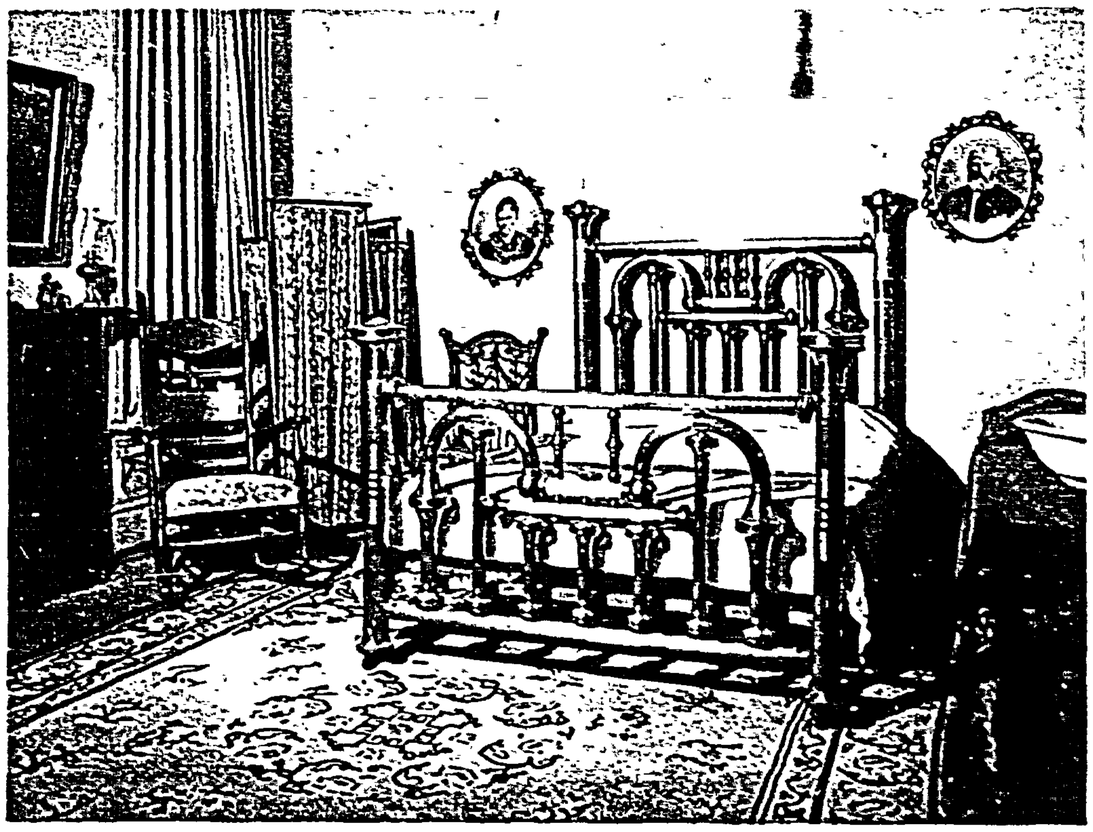
The large family quartered themselves in the main floor bedroom-sitting room, preparing the rest of the house for roomers. When all was ready, Emily placed an advertisement in the *Register-Call:* "No. 2 Bankers' Row Boarding House—. Lee, Prop. This house is open for local patronage. The aim of the proprietor will be to please the guests. The table is bountifully supplied with the delicacies of the season. Terms reasonable."

Emily's southern cooking was already well-known and the rooms were promptly rented to merchants, bank clerks and Cornish miners. In addition to their own children, Alice, Sarah, Katherine and John, the Lees adopted an orphaned Irish boy, Andy. A granddaughter, Edna Lee Halden, was born in that main

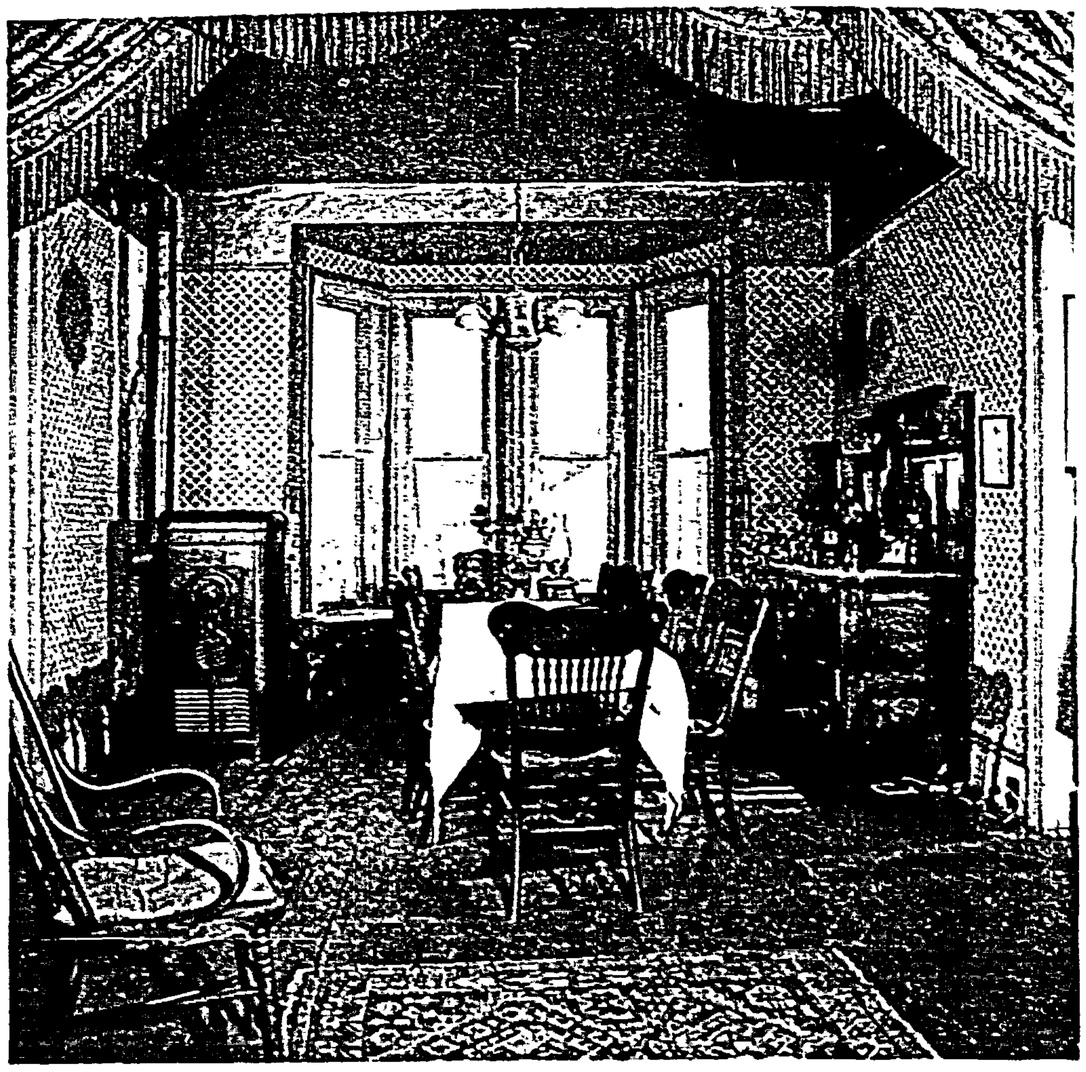
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The main-floor bedroom contains one of the three fireplaces. The cast-iron mantelpieces were painted to resemble marble.



Mrs. Potter, one of the city's leading hostesses, "fed the elite of the mountains" in the spacious formal dining room.

The old brick home returns to her glory

EX-SLAVE *continued*

floor bedroom in 1884, the daughter of Alice Lee Halden.

Children's ice cream socials and taffy pulls were now frequent events at Lee House, while Mrs. Lee and Aunt Clara were stalwart members of the St. James Methodist Church across the street. (Founded in 1860, St. James is Colorado's oldest active Protestant Church.)

Believing in the importance of education, Jeremiah Lee set a special time for the children's study. Young John, however, balked:

"What's the use of schooling, Daddy?" he once asked. "How can black slave folks ever become bankers like Mr. Potter, or engineers like Professor Hill?"

(Prof., later U.S. Sen. Nathaniel P. Hill, had built the Boston and Colorado smelter at Black Hawk.)

Jeremiah had an answer: "Life gives you back what you put into it, son. Black or white — skin color doesn't matter. Even White people have to work for what they get; we just have to work a little harder. With an education, you'll have better opportunities."

Jeremiah Lee lived to see his dream realized. John was to become an engineer, and Katherine and Alice became teachers, though they were only one generation from plantation slaves.

Jeremiah Lee died in January 1904, at 74. He was buried at Denver's pioneer Riverside Cemetery and Emily was placed beside him in 1907. Through the years, eight more members of the Lee family were carried back from Cleveland where they had moved, to share the family burial plot.

By World War I, Central City was almost a ghost town. People left the mountains as the mines closed, taking only what they could carry. Some buildings were left with furnishings in place and doors unlocked — victims of vandals and weather for the next 15 years. Miners purchased many old houses for $5 and chopped them up for firewood.

So majestic in her prime, Lee House was sold for back taxes in 1906 to Sauer McShane, a Central City merchant, and was eventually abandoned in 1916 by a local school superintendent, a Prof. Frank H. Clark.

Central City didn't feel the Depression of the 1930s—it was already long depressed. Nearly abandoned, the town became a mecca for a group of artists, The Ateliers, who spent weekends painting and exploring the mining camps.

One Atelier, an architect named Carl F. Bieler, climbed the hill behind the courthouse one glorious June day in 1931. The old cottonwood tree was full of birds as he set up his easel on the gingerbread porch of Lee House.

Bieler started as he heard footsteps inside the house. Ghost towns have ghosts, he thought, and went to investigate. Finding the back door open, he gingerly stepped inside. He moved through the kitchen, turned, and ran nose-to-muzzle into Old Diamond, one of 12 burros that roamed the town. Old Diamond stabled in Lee House. Shooing out the burro, Bieler looked over the house.

Lath and plaster hung down in the back, where the ceiling had given way. In spite of this, the ramshackle mansion seemed like a stately old lady to Bieler. Elegant filigree wallpaper still adorned the high-ceilinged rooms, reminiscent of another era.

Bieler purchased Lee House for back taxes and repaired the roof. But furnishing the mansion was another challenge. He combed the town for authentic furniture, attended auctions, purchased some pieces at the Andersen Store near Black Hawk. A furniture maker himself, Bieler fashioned a dining room table from the base of an old candy showcase. Two folding chairs originally transported in ox carts were found for the parlors.

Gradually, Lee House returned to her former splendor. Her living room boasted a grand piano, lace curtains, a magnificent cherry organ, and black tufted leather love seat with matching side chairs. Oriental rugs now covered the broad-planked floors.

One day, as Bieler was repairing a table on the porch, two women stopped by. Mrs. Ida Kruse McFarlane and Miss Anne Evans, descendants of pioneer families, introduced themselves. They described their plans to restore the town's Opera House for musical and dramatic festivals.

"But we need a place to house the casts," Mrs. McFarlane remarked, eyeing the old mansion. And so the Lee House became the first Cast House of the Central City Opera Company.

Known as "The Little Teller House," the old brick home returned to her glory. Bieler engaged a great German cook, Mrs. August Hoins, who carried on the mansion's tradition for fine cuisine.

Music again poured from her windows, as opera stars Josephine Neri and Josephine Antoine practiced their arias. When Lillian Gish performed her dying scene in *Camille*, it was on a settee borrowed from the Lee House parlor. Walter Huston and his wife, Nan Sunderland, Robert Edmund Jones and the entire *Othello* cast lived at Lee House in 1934. Lloyd Shaw and his square dancers, performing after the operas in Williams Stables, bunked during the opera season in the upstairs bedrooms.

Mrs. McFarlane, calling again on Bieler, announced a fund-raising project: "We shall name opera house chairs for prominent pioneers. Every $100 donor may select a pioneer. Will you affix the names, Mr. Bieler?"

Using the porch as a workshop, Bieler carved the names on 250 old hickory opera chairs. (One such chair honors the Negro laundress, Aunt Clara Brown!)

It's no wonder that Bieler was happy recently when he was able to bring an end to litigation over the title to the property and go forward with plans to return the house to its old glory.

"Lee House played a vital role in Colorado's early days and should be designated as an historic residence," he says. "Meanwhile I'm negotiating with several civic organizations that would like to obtain it."

It's a happy ending to the story. Lee House will live again. Lights will glow in its windows and the sound of happy voices again be heard in its halls and rooms.

What 92-year-old mansion could ask for more? ■

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