

# The Lion House

## A COLLINS STREET HISTORIC LANDMARK



On the west side of North Collins Street is a familiar city landmark. Set back behind aging Magnolias is a beautiful piece of our history known to most residents as “the Lion House.” Only a privileged few know much about its origins or significance. That group includes Robert Parker, grandson of the original owners, and Wayne and Rebecca Shuff, the current owners, who are willing to share the incredible story of the Lion House.

John and Mary Chapman built the lovely residence in 1908 for a whopping \$4500; at the time it was

one of the most elegant and modern houses in Plant City. The two-story even contained an upstairs bathroom - an unusual feature in 1908. Many original elements of the house have been restored or preserved to honor the original grandeur. The ornately crafted wrought iron fence that graces the front lawn are original to the house, as are many Boxwoods and Camellias that are still thriving almost 100 years later. But in 1908 the front yard contained no lions and no grass; instead, the yard was swept and weeded, a fairly common practice in that time. A stable sat where the garage is now and

the chicken coop containing Rhode Island Reds was located in the back yard. Inside, almost everything was composed of beautiful Florida Heart of Pine including the floors, numerous fireplaces and trim work. The original front door was hand carved from this resilient material. Stained glass windows were present throughout, and three balconies, including the widows-walk, created a stylish impression.

Unfortunately, John Chapman died in 1910 and the widowed Mary turned the residence into a boarding house. The bottom floor was converted into two apartments and the top floor contained two more apartments, which could be rented for about one dollar per night. This transition caused many rooms to be altered to accommodate the guests, which included many of Plant City’s elite families. Mary lived in what is now the master bedroom and a makeshift bathroom was added on the adjoining porch. The kitchen was where the breakfast room sits now, while the Shuff’s living room is in the same spot as the communal living room Ms. Chapman inhabited. Upstairs, the bathroom was partitioned into three dimly lit sections – one each for a sink, a toilet and a claw foot tub, respectively. Over the years, the Borings and the Moodys stayed in these second floor apartments, in what is now the Shuff’s grandson’s bedroom.

When Mary died in 1954, the house was left to her daughters, Marie Browning and Geraldine Browning. By this time the balconies were gone, because they had fallen into disrepair, even though the house went under renovation in the 1940s. In the mid-1960s the Nyberg family purchased the house and began to slowly mod-

ernize a few select features, like the grassy front lawn.

In 1974 the Broward family bought the house and completely renovated the structure. Inside, they converted apartments back into the original rooms and added a modern kitchen, a bathroom and a dressing area where the porch and makeshift bathroom stood. They also incorporated shag carpeting throughout, as well as wood paneling upstairs. The balconies were refurbished and a balustrade was added to the front porch. But most importantly, the two lions, affectionately named Tim and Todd, were added to the front porch.

Wayne and Rebecca Shuff bought the Lion House in 2001, and over the past five years they have brought it back to its original splendor. The Shuffs restored the original wood floors, as well as the pine in Wayne’s favorite room, the office. They also hired carpenters to replicate woodwork lost through time, like the back staircase, and they added duplicate woodwork to the rooms that were recently added.

The Shuff’s painstaking attention to detail makes the house a true treasure; even though nearly a century has passed, the house seems to have been almost unchanged. It is now filled with all the charms of the twentieth century from the old widows-walk to the beautiful guard lions and the timeless elegance of historical significance.

*Sources: Plant City Photo Archives, Inc., Bud Lee Collection, Plant City Photo Archives Oral History Project, Rebecca Smith, Robert Parker, and Wayne and Rebecca Shuff.*