

Mansion Gone But the Soul Remains

BY ELLEN GRZECH
Free Press Staff Writer

The magic was still there Wednesday.

The fabled Gar Wood mansion on the Detroit River was an abandoned, mutilated shell even before a fire Tuesday night finished it off. But the charred timbers, broken concrete and empty beer cans couldn't kill the aura of luxury and that the very rich people who once lived there enjoyed.

Tourists wandered through the rubble, poking through the rooms where industrialist Gar Wood and his family held their dinner parties and balls.

One woman picked up three ceramic tiles, and a man walked off with a fixture for a light switch.

Sightseers on boats sailed and motored close to shore, pointing at the windowless, roofless mansion.

MRS. IDA MAE Koerber has lived across a canal from the mansion for 49 years, and watched it being built in the 20s.

Tuesday night she watched the fire destroy it.

"It was like a nightmare. It was exactly as I think the fires of hell are," Mrs. Koerber said. "It was like watching an old friend in the last throes of its agony."

The fire started when lightning struck the mansion, according to a witness.

Billy Graham, captain of the charter boat Heleen, said he was upriver from the estate about 10:30 p.m. Tuesday when he saw lightning strike the area.

When he got closer, he saw a fire on the roof.

THE LAND around the mansion, which is located on a 67-acre island west of Kitchener on the city's east side, is overgrown with weeds and trees.

But Mrs. Koerber remembered when a full-time gardener tended a beautiful lawn and formal gardens.

Sixteen-year-old Jim Schmelzer visited the mansion with memories, too, but they were different from Mrs. Koerber's.

"It's a bomb place," he said. "We used to come up here a lot."

After Wood sold the mansion to Detroit land developer Emanuel Harris in the 60's, hippies and then a motorcycle gang moved in.

When the hip replaced the rich, the neighbors complained about noise, destruction and vandalism.

But Schmelzer remembered the good times he had visiting his two brothers who belonged to the Outlaws, the motorcycle gang that lived on the estate.

After years and a court fight, a Wayne County Circuit Court judge ordered Harris to board up the mansion in 1972. When it was ordered closed after more complaints in 1973, it stayed empty.

"I got a couple organ pipes in my basement," Schmelzer said, pointing out the features of the mansion. The huge organ in the ballroom was something, he said.

Now, there was only a blackened chunk of the organ's body, pedals still intact, lying on the floor.

The pool in the basement was overfilled with rainwater; the boat house attached to the mansion was filled with rotting wood and swallows.



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By 1970 the Gar Wood estate had fallen on bad times, with weed-choked lawns, crumbling steps and vandalized windows standing as a sad reminder of what elegance it once boasted. But glimmers of the past remained—a pen-sive statue (above) still staring off over the river from its place in front of the mansion's portico. Wednesday morning, only a shell of the portico remained (right).

There were more signs of the old days: A row of sockets with some colored light-bulbs still in them that once lit the ballroom with its fluted columns in relief.

MRS. NAOMI Johnson worked as a maid at the mansion during the 1940's and remembers it as the best job she ever had.

She was an upstairs maid and worked with a half-dozen other servants while Wood lived there, and said she used to change uniforms two or three times a day.

"You couldn't go walking around with a wrinkled uniform," Mrs. Johnson said.

Wood made his fortune after inventing a hydraulic lift for dump trucks, and later branched out into other industry.

For pleasure, he built and raced speed-



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boats. The Gar Wood hydroplane race on the Detroit River, named after him, was run last week.

Harris, a fire commissioner during Mayor Jerome Cavanagh's administration, planned to demolish the mansion and build an apartment development.

Demolition had stalled because trucks couldn't fit across the narrow bridge to the island, his secretary said.

Mrs. Ruth Marino, the mansion's nearest neighbor on the island said she watched the "holocaust" last night.

"To me it's a national disgrace what happened to the house," she said. "I'm foolish, I know, but I feel sorry for the house."



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AT LEFT: Although an overgrown lawn belies its state of disrepair, the Gar Wood mansion still cuts an impressive figure in 1970.

AT RIGHT: The mansion stood in ruins Wednesday, the victim of a fire apparently ignited when lightning struck the abandoned building.

