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The Castle, in Chicago's Beverly neighborhood, still inspires love, longing; new book highlights its history, offers a tour | Books & Literature

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4-5 minutes

It's been more than 40 years since Errol Magidson first saw the Castle with its crenelated towers, stone walls, parapets and arched doorways and windows.

Only this castle, rising on top of a hill with even — no kidding — slit-like windows perfect for archers to fire at marauders, wasn't located in Europe; instead, it was built by an Irishman named Robert Givens back in the 1870s in the Beverly neighborhood of Chicago.

"My wife and I were looking for a place to live and a friend told us to come out to Beverly as it's a great place," recalls Magidson, author of "Chicago's Only Castle: The History of Givens' Irish Castle and its Keepers," and its companion DVD.

“So we did, and we were driving down Longwood Avenue, looking at the homes including one that’s a Frank Lloyd Wright and were stopped at a light. We looked up and saw the Castle.”

Enchanted by what they saw, Magidson and his wife, since deceased, moved to Beverly. It didn’t matter that she was Catholic and he was Jewish, he joined the Men of the Castle, a group dedicated to preserving Chicago’s only castle, which in 1942 had become a Unitarian Church.

“We worked at raising money and when I retired and was looking for something to do, I volunteered to make a documentary about the Castle,” Magidson said.

Over the decades, Magidson read everything he could about the Castle’s origins, trying to get beyond repetitious material based on faulty sources.

“One reporter would write it and everyone else would quote it as if it were true, but often it wasn’t,” he said.

When he first started, old newspapers were on microfiche, if available at all. But he was able to reach out to historians who helped him learn how to sift through information including how in 1909 the addresses in Chicago changed.

“It wasn’t like you could open a book or get online and there was all that history,” he said.

Legend has it, Magidson said, that Givens, a real estate developer, popular novelist, proposed mayoral candidate and

world traveler who wrote travel reviews for the Chicago Evening Post, built his castle in 1877-78 after seeing one he liked on Ireland's River Dee in County Louth, and sketching it so he could return home and build it for his Irish fiancée.

“My children went to pre-school at the castle, so it felt almost like an extension of home when they were young,” said Mike Flannery, a political reporter for Fox 32 News in Chicago who lives near the Castle on Longwood Drive.

“Sitting atop the limestone ridge above Longwood Drive, it’s one of the neighborhood’s most prominent landmarks. Returning from a long trip, it’s always good to see the Givens Castle; means we’re almost home.”

After Givens, the Castle was home, from 1895 until 1897, to the Chicago Female College. It then was owned by John Burdett, a Chicago inventor and manufacturer from 1909 to 1921.

“J.B. Burdett was an inventor and manufacturer, whose company still exists but under a different name,” Magdison said. “He was also an early automobilist who won the first race from Chicago to Joliet in 1901.

“Dr. Miroslaw Siemens bought it that year and kept it until 1942. He was a medical doctor of Ukrainian descent and his wife was the founder of the Ukrainian National Museum,” Magidson said.

Despite all these changes, much of the original interior

remains, including the ornate woodwork and a skylight on the third floor, as well as a stained glass window with the Givens' family coat of arms and fireplaces on each floor.

“The Castle was built by stones quarried in Joliet that were taken by the railroad to 103rd and Vincennes,” Magidson said. “There a builder cut them to size, and then they were shipped by horse and wagon to the house.

The property now is only about half the size of the original lot. But still, it is a castle.