

An Irish castle on a Far South Side hill

Beverly neighborhood icon celebrated in book and documentary film



RICK KOGAN
Sidewalks

On the top of a hill on the Far South Side there sits an ancient castle.

Understandably, because it is the city's only castle, it has long held a special place in the hearts and memories of those who have called the Beverly neighborhood home.

"For us, it's more than a mere iconic symbol of the neighborhood," says Mike Flannery, the astute political reporter and editor (now with Fox 32 News)



RAUL TORRES PHOTO 1981

Chicago's only castle was built in 1887 by Robert Givins, who had arrived in Chicago as a teenager in 1863 with 10 cents in his pocket.

and a longtime neighbor of the building. "My children went to preschool at the castle. We bought many a Christmas tree at the annual sale on the parking lot. Spotting it as we travel west on 103rd Street is always eagerly anticipated. It means we're almost home."

The castle was built in 1887 as the home for the family of Robert Givins, who had arrived in Chicago as a teenager in 1863 with 10 cents in his pocket and a distinguished lineage in his native Canada. He got into the

real estate game and did very well here.

Not only did he build the castle and live in it with his family on and off for about a decade, but he owned much of the property in the surrounding area and elsewhere across the city. He was touted as a potential candidate for mayor. He traveled extensively. He wrote novels. He died in 1915 and is buried at Rosehill Cemetery on the Far North Side.

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His colorful life and the equally lively story of the castle are captured in great detail in two compelling ways that share one title, "Chicago's Only Castle: The History of Givins' Irish Castle and Its Keepers": a 90-minute 2011 documentary and a recently published, lavishly illustrated and deeply researched book (www.chicagosonlycastle.org), both by Errol Magidson.

Givins was perhaps inspired to build his castle after being impressed by a similar structure while on a trip to Ireland. He was almost surely influenced by a previous castle-builder named Potter Palmer, who had a few years earlier built a massive castle at what is now 350 N. Lake Shore Drive as a home but also as a means to help promote and sell the vast tracts of land he owned in the surrounding area, soon to be known as the Gold Coast.

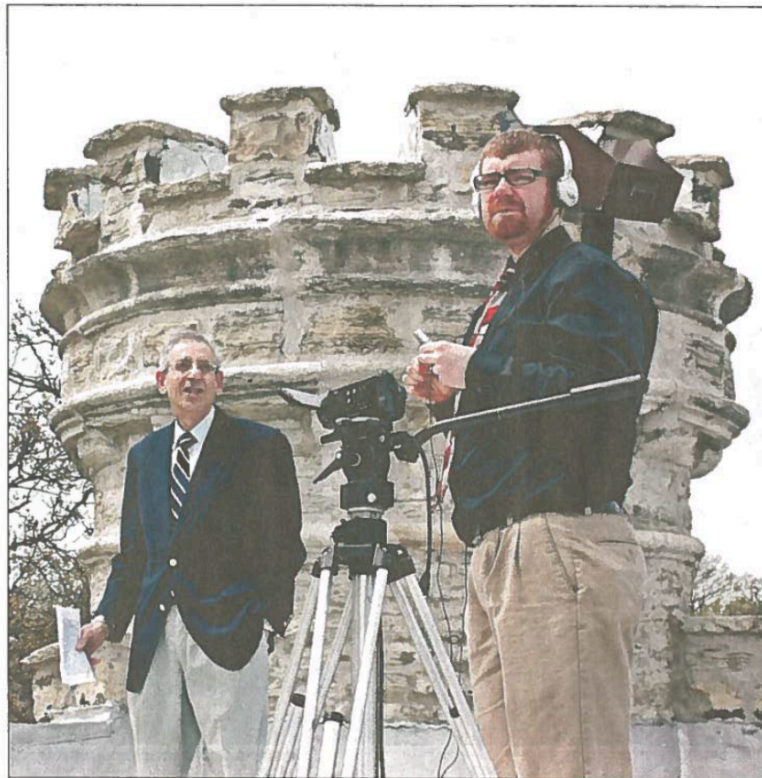
Palmer's castle came down in 1950, but Givins' remains.

It was rented from Givins from 1895 to 1897 by the Chicago Female College and sold in 1909 to a manufacturer and inventor named John Burdett and his wife, Jessie. They lived here until 1921, at which time they sold it to Mirosaw and Bonnie Siemens, he a doctor and founder of the Ukrainian National Museum.

In 1942, the castle was purchased by the Beverly Unitarian Fellowship, in whose hands it has remained, offering all the familiar things that a church offers, as well as that annual Christmas tree sale referred to by Flannery and preschool classes (m.beverlycastleacademy.org).

Magidson came upon the building the way many people do: It caught him by surprise.

In 1977, he and his wife, the late Jan, were driving around looking to relocate from their North Side



LINDA LAMBERTY PHOTO 2011

Errol Magidson, left, and co-director Joshua Van Tuyl on the roof of Givins Castle.

apartment when they pulled to a stop at the traffic light at 103rd Street and Longwood Drive. As he writes, "I could not believe my eyes. Visions of kings and queens and knights in shining armor entered my mind. It was then I knew this was the right neighborhood for us."

He would live in the neighborhood for the next 35 years as he fashioned a successful career as a professor in academia at area colleges and universities — and developed a deep devotion to the castle and its history that is manifest in the documentary and book.

He is giving the proceeds from the book to efforts to make some needed structural repairs in the building. That will certainly please all of those for whom the castle is a special place.

"It will always be a special place for me," says

Debbie Doody Furlong, who grew up in the neighborhood and attended preschool in the building. "Even though it was a little spooky for me as a kid, I love the place. Every time I see it, like when I drive down to drop off one of my kids at a cousin's house nearby, it does me good to see that old castle."

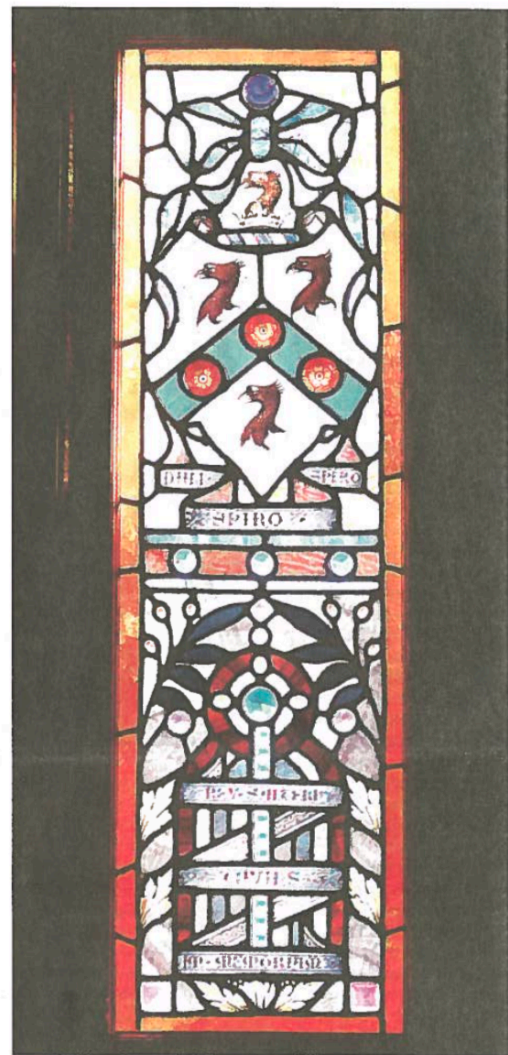
The castle is not open for regular tours except on special occasions (www.beverlyunitarian.org). But there is nothing to stop you from ogling it from the street or sidewalk, or attending a service within. And, if you happen to be in this charming and significant neighborhood, try to make a visit to the Ridge Historical Society at 10621 S. Seeley Ave.

It was there, nearly 20 years ago, that I met Linda Lambert, a society board member and passionate

researcher. She explained that "ridge" refers to the Blue Island Ridge, the 30- to 60-foot-high part of a moraine created more than 12,000 years ago, when the glaciers retreated. It runs majestically, dotted with large homes, through the Beverly and Morgan Park neighborhoods. The castle is one of many buildings that sit atop it.

Lambert also told me that she had lived in Beverly since her birth in 1951 and that her family's presence in the area dates to the 1840s. She said, "My thing is people. They are the ultimate source of information, people who have lived here and can tell us what life was like." Now the official historian for the society, she served as an associate producer of the documentary and as the editor of the book.

No one ever spent more



MICHAEL MAGIDSON PHOTO 2011

A stained-glass window with the Givins coat of arms was installed in the castle in memory of Robert Givins' father.

time looking at the castle than did Jack Simmerling, the late local artist who grew up in the neighborhood. He was interviewed for this book and said, "I have painted the castle in every conceivable mood (and season). I studied the castle because I love the intricacy of the stonework, the battlements. ... It played a very significant role in the development of the Longwood Drive residential section."

Just east of the castle is the Heritage Gallery, 1907 W. 103rd St., where the artist worked for nearly 30 years alongside his daughter Vicki, a master custom framing expert. You will find there many examples of Simmerling's work, including many versions of the castle that he first saw as a little boy and that so powerfully grabbed his eye for keeps.

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