

# Nelsons refurbish Aitkin historical architectural landmark



The historic "Casey House/Maryhill Manor" is the current home of Larry and Loa Nelson.

by **CONNIE PETTERSEN**,  
Freelance writer

## Part I: The Origin of the Casey House

When Larry and Loa Nelson decided to move to Aitkin from Wisconsin in 2001, they fell in love with the former Oakridge Home/Maryhill Academy and purchased it. It suits them perfectly. They are both interested in history and genealogy. They also own Aitkin Antiques and Larry is a board member for the Aitkin County Historical Society.

Their large white house, built near the turn of the twentieth century, is a local landmark. It's listed on the National Register of Historic Places as: "A highly

visible Queen Anne/Classic Revival residence on Highway 47 and Second Avenue . . . a two and a half story clapboard structure resting on a raised stone foundation and covered by a steeply pitched cross gable roof with gable returns and bracketed cornice . . . a wrap-around porch on the south . . ."

It stands today with as much refinement and dignity as in 1901 when it was considered "one of the town's handsomest residences." Originally built on twenty-two wooded acres, the house looks much as it did a hundred years ago. However, the land has changed considerably. Now its graceful elegance is revered from the middle of town.

In researching their home, Larry and Loa Nelson discovered a wealth of historical data. Their house has been referred to by a number of names. It has had a substantial historic and religious impact on the area, and they are its fifth



Prominent pioneer Aitkin businessman, Patrick Casey, Sr.

owners in over a century of existence. The original proprietor, prominent businessman Patrick Casey, Sr., had it built at the turn of the twentieth century. From 1901 until 1938 it was the "Casey House."

Patrick Casey Sr. was a young man in his twenties when he first arrived in the Aitkin area around 1874-a few years after



Elizabeth Emma (Killeen) Casey (Mrs. Patrick Casey, Sr.)

Aitkin was founded," Larry Nelson said in an interview at their home. "Casey first worked as a teamster in the logging camps."

At some point, Casey met Civil War veteran, Colonel Warren Potter, who was an innovative Aitkin merchant. Potter hired the young man to work for him. "That relationship lasted until Casey's death in 1910," Nelson said.

Casey was put in charge of Potter's store in Grand Rapids for a number of years. Then in 1882, Patrick Casey and Elizabeth Emma Killeen were married at Fitzroy Harbour, Ontario. Casey took his bride to Aitkin where they

remained for the rest of their lives.

"When Colonel Potter's business associate, David Williard, retired, Casey

was offered a partnership," Nelson said. That successful enterprise, the Potter-Casey Company, was the region's foremost mercantile establishment. Potter and Casey became respected turn-of-the century business figures.

Patrick and Emma Casey had seven children - four daughters and three sons, Albert Edward, John Am-

brose, Erma, Celestine, Nora, Elizabeth, and Patrick Jr. According to Aitkin Courthouse records, Albert Edward "drowned in the village" (probably in the then-called Mud River) in June 1890 at age seven. The boy was likely the first, or one of the first, interred at St. Thomas Cemetery, which was deeded to the church a month later in July 1890.

The Potter-Casey business flourished and sometime near the turn of the twentieth century, Patrick Casey hired skilled local architect, Nels Holden, to build the large wood home at the edge of the community. The Caseys moved in around 1901.

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(Youngest to oldest/ left to right) The Casey children about the ages they moved into the new house. Patrick Jr., Elizabeth, Nora, Celestine, Erma and John Ambrose Casey. (The oldest, John Ambrose, graduated high school in Aitkin in 1901.)

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That year their son John Ambrose (called Ambrose), along with his classmate, Miss Jessie Kempton, comprised the "Class of 1901," Aitkin High School's first graduating class. Ambrose later became a pharmacist who owned Casey Drug, an Aitkin mainstay for decades.

The centennial celebration book, "A Story of Faith 1881-1981" published by St. James Catholic Church, indicates the Casey's and Potter's provided lots across from

the high school in 1902 to build St. James. Casey was also instrumental in the planning and funding of the new brick church.



In June 1890, Albert Edward Casey, drowned in the Village of Aitkin at age seven.

The Casey's donated numerous items to be auctioned and helped with fundraising events.

The family remained devout in their faith, despite personal tragedy.

Their youngest daughter Elizabeth became a nun, Sister Cyril Clare, in 1918. After Patrick Casey's death in 1910, his widow, Emma,

resided in their house a number of years before moving to a smaller dwelling. It was her desire that the "Casey House" become a Catholic school. In 1938, it was deeded to the Benedictine Sisters of Duluth and refurbished. Renamed "Maryhill Academy," it opened in 1939, dawning a new era of historical impact as Aitkin's first and only parochial grade school.

Maryhill Academy operated for twenty-nine years, educating hundreds of children through the eighth grade. A shortage of nuns in the teaching profession compelled the closing in 1968. "Although other issues such as heating, upkeep and maintenance costs probably contributed to the decision," Larry Nelson said.

A portion of Maryhill acreage was sold in 1969 to the Housing and Redevelopment Authority to build the apartment complex, Maryhill Manor. The church later sold Maryhill Academy to Roger and Muriel Glaim for use as a group home for teen girls referred to as "Courage House." In the 1980's, it was again sold, renamed "Oakridge Home," and used a residence for developmentally challenged adults.

In the summer of 2001, Larry and Loa Nelson came to Aitkin to visit the area. Both had retired

from active careers and considered possibilities of where they would want a retirement home.

"One option was coming up here, possibly on a lake

like sitting rooms with long windows framed by transparent curtains. There is a formal dining room, a kitchen pantry, antique furnishings and thriving plants. The two fireplaces have original mantel and tile.

The house is attractively wall-papered and decorated with early twentieth century looking décor. Leading up to the six bedrooms on the second floor is a formal wooden staircase with ascending walls filled with old pictures, many of Christ or Mary.

Faint chimes of a clock could be heard in the distance, along with the sounds our feet made on the wooden staircase, reminiscent of bygone eras of scuffed leather shoes

group home staff, with a large room once called the "commons area."

"It was a bare bones house when we bought it," Loa said, "pretty much kid-proofed over the years."

"We've gradually pecked away at things since moving in," Larry said. "Loa's done lots of painting, wall-papering and decorating to spruce up the place." The Nelsons have also done extensive yard work; planted flowers, shrubs and had the exterior repainted.

Between refinishing and maintaining their home, managing the antique business, plus Larry's election to the city council, the couple has plenty of projects to keep busy. "I've certainly enjoyed coming back to my hometown to live," Larry said. "I hope Loa has, too."

Often asked if they would ever turn their heritage home into a Bed and Breakfast someday, the Nelsons said they've considered it, having operated one in their home in Anchorage, Alaska. They've also complied with everything needed to obtain a license. However, since taking on Aitkin Antiques, the business takes a considerable amount of time.

"The B&B has been put on the back burner, and we may never revive it," Larry said. "Whether this ever happens or not, it is the logical use for the house someday."

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** If you were a student or teacher at Maryhill Academy and have pictures or a story to share, please contact me at sonshinegirl56431@yahoo.com or call the NewsHopper, at 218-927-6990 for use in Part II "Maryhill Academy".



Loa and Larry Nelson are proud owners of their National Historic Register home.

shore site," Larry Nelson said, "I'd spent nine years of my youth in Aitkin and considered it my hometown." His father was a highway patrolman beginning in 1946 and Larry graduated from Aitkin High School in 1955.

Loa had always been fascinated by old, stately houses, and took interest in the one called Oakridge. "After a chance remark to realtor, Tony Cummings, we became aware it might be available," Nelson said. The couple moved in later that fall.

Much of the house's structure remains as it appeared a century ago. Walking in the front door felt like stepping into a time capsule. The first floor has several parlor-



One of the downstairs fireplaces with the original mantel and tile in the Nelson's historic home.

marching up and down the steps.

The third floor held the first and second grades during the academy days. It was later sectioned off into several offices for the



The formal dining room in the Nelson's home.

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