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WEEKEND BREAK

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RIDDLE ME THIS...

THE PUZZLING POSITION OF THE PHANTOM STAIRCASE

By **GAIL HENRIKSON**
The Daily Astorian

I have always been a building hugger. Over time, however, I have gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of how similar old homes are to people. They bear the emotional and physical scars of the inhabitants with whom they have interacted over the decades. They reflect the proclivities and aesthetics of previous owners and occupants. And, like the majority of us, they rarely reveal all their secrets during a first encounter.

There are even times when buildings tell us half-truths or outright lies about their histories and ages. I'm sure it's not a deliberate attempt to deceive, but more likely a byproduct of our own self-absorbed biases and opinions. After all, it is much easier to work with preconceived notions than to invest the energy and effort to learn the truth.

A case in point is the house my partner, Rick Crawford, and I own. I have developed a fascination with two very perplexing matters. I blame this on having read too many Nancy Drew books as an impressionable youth. This instilled in me not only a wildly out-of-date fashion sensibility, but also a lifelong belief that mystery and intrigue lurk around every corner.

Phantom staircase

The first case is The Puzzling Position of the Phantom Staircase. The suspect stairway is in a circa-1920 Craftsman house. It runs from the second floor straight out to the backyard. Initially, we thought this was how it was originally constructed, although it appeared not to have been used for several years. Even though it wasn't practical for day-to-day use, it had certainly been expedient when we moved furniture upstairs.

After the initial move-in, we basically ignored this stairwell — until we noticed the phantom stairway. It's a slanted, wood-backed area that runs parallel and above the stairs from the mudroom to the basement and would seem to be a remnant staircase from the second floor. The problem is that such a layout would have run directly into our existing back staircase.

Clearly, a mystery was afoot. A mystery that makes no sense, unless we are living in the Astoria version of the Winchester Mystery House.

Over the course of several months, we've considered various scenarios, ranging from the highly logical to the outright ludicrous. We have measured walls, looked for and found hinge marks indicating where doors once swung, and pondered over perplexing paint marks.

Several theories

Our current theory is that the back staircase stopped just short of the original back wall of the house, turned to the left and exited into what today is the mudroom. We also suspect that there was an interior door to the basement, which has been removed, along with those accompanying stairs. A third hypothesis is that there was also a back door out of the basement into the back yard. That theory would explain the strangely buried concrete steps under the back deck, but we can't find any evidence of a door ever having been there. Nor can we imagine how these three stairways could have converged in the same small area. We know that something has changed, but we can't quite pin down what and how it has changed.

Every time we think we have The Answer, some new piece of evidence pops up, and we find ourselves back at the Astoria Mystery House theory. Eventually, we'll solve this conundrum by taking the backing off the phantom staircase. In the meantime, it provides an intriguing diversion.

Showcase sign

Recently, we were distracted from our stair-sleuthing by another puzzle — a case I call The Secret of the Showcase Sign. About a month ago, we decided to paint and add shelves to an under-utilized upstairs closet. When we started closely examining the space, we thought we had found the missing stairway to the attic. However, we later learned that the closet was added after the original upstairs hallway had been closed off.

Curiously, the plywood shelf in this makeshift closet was actually part of a sign. The portion we have reads "Originals Inc. Coast's Showcase of Oregon Talents" in red and brown lettering on a yellow background. There also appears to be the bottom part of a tree in the upper right corner. Aha! Yet another mystery to be solved!

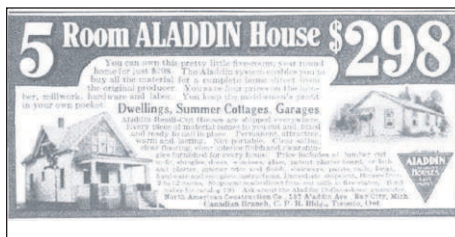


Submitted Photo by Rick Crawford / Deftly Daft Productions

Two staircases?



Aladdin Redi-Cut Advertisement for knocked-down kits for houses, in Popular Mechanics, May 1908.



North American Construction Co./Aladdin Houses Aladdin Redi-Cut home advertisement featured in The American Magazine, March 1915.

Both Rick and I have done hours of research trying to solve these riddles. We've learned about Aladdin Redi-Cut kit homes, found Sara's Old Photos on Facebook, and read about a local court case in the 1960s involving two local fishing vessels — the Betty and the Eagle. All very interesting subjects in their own right, but of no immediate relevance to the cases at hand. Then again, is knowledge ever irrelevant? Perhaps the best lessons we've learned through our detective work are ones we already knew — open-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance. Virtues we would all do well to remember in these times.

Gail Henrikson is happily and gainfully employed as an ad designer at The Daily Astorian. In addition to previous contributions to the paper, her poetry has been published as part of the Hoffman Center's Word and Image project and in the North Coast Squid. She and her partner, Rick Crawford, live with the Feline Four in the aforementioned enigmatic staircase-challenged house in Astoria.



Submitted Photo by Rick Crawford / Deftly Daft Productions
 The back door and the marks where the hidden door might be.



Submitted Photo by Rick Crawford / Deftly Daft Productions
 A sign found in a makeshift closet.