

A new lifestyle column about living in and preserving a large Astoria home

BY LAURI SERAFIN

Old houses that are full of character and faded elegance are my true passion. From an early age, I always knew I would live in a big old house. I bought my first old house, a 1917 Colonial Revival, in my 20s. In hindsight, that lovely home was a test run for the current restoration project in Astoria.

My husband and I have worked on the Forsstrom House for more than three years with an army of talented local contractors. Every month, we experience challenges and a success if we are lucky.

This is my current life's work in the age of COVID-19. The project provides focus that is important for my mental health during this difficult time. I adore creating an elegant period residence, celebrating the past and providing stewardship of scarce historic resources.

I have learned volumes in my 40-plus years of old house living, restoration, renovation, antique hoarding, historic décor and research. I am not a professional in the preservation, construction or design industry. Instead, this new column will feature practical advice, tips and strategies about old house life. I'll share insight on historic restoration and interior décor from the trenches of my real life experiences. I assure you I am a hands-on home owner, and work with my contractors and get very dirty.

Many of the locals I have met are keen on old houses. I am often approached for assistance. I want to know what you want help with. What do you want to read about? What projects are you working on in your old house? Or, do you just like the old house ambiance or want to replicate old house charm in an authentic manner? Send me an email with your questions.

I am planning monthly columns about house styles, old house history research, antique lighting, old windows, wall treatments, interior color selection, exterior paint colors, period décor, incorporating salvaged materials and historic décor on a budget. I will use examples from our house projects and other local houses. I will pull in experts for consultation as needed.

Let's start with a bit of history of our house. Dr. Toivo and Alli Forsstrom are the owners responsible for the current configuration of our historic house.

Dr. Toivo Forsstrom was born in Finland in 1867. He graduated from medical school in Helsinki, Finland's capital, in 1897, and



Photos by Nikki Davidson

ABOVE: Columnist Lauri Serafin arranges items on the fireplace inside her home, the Forsstrom House. **RIGHT:** A photo of Alli Forsstrom posed at the fireplace of the home sits in the same place the photo was taken more than 100 years ago. **BELOW RIGHT:** The Forsstrom House in Astoria.

completed post graduate work in Berlin and Vienna. Dr. Forsstrom arrived in Astoria in December 1905. He is listed in the 1906 Astoria City Directory at No. 9 Page Building at 549 Commercial.

He quickly built a lucrative practice as a physician and surgeon. In 1910, his practice was relocated in the new Spexarth Building on Commercial Street. He spoke five languages: Finnish, Russian, Swedish, German and English. He was popular with the Finnish population, sea captains and crews.

Dr. Forsstrom and Alli Ingeborg Lauren were married in March 1909. The newlyweds moved into their newly purchased 1894 Victorian home. The couple moved to Portland in 1911 and returned to Astoria in 1912.

They decided to renovate and enlarge their Astoria home. The 1894 home was stripped of Victorian ornamentation, moved on the property and rotated to face west. A full second story was added in the Craftsman style and morphed the house into a modified American Foursquare. A mahogany grand staircase and service staircases were added to the first floor plan. The date of this major renovation is unclear, but is thought to be circa 1915.

Alli Forsstrom was elected Astoria Regatta Queen in 1914. I treasure my pictures of the beautiful Mrs. Forsstrom in her regalia. The couple divorced in the summer of 1926.

Dr. Forsstrom married Nelma Mattson Northe in July 1933. Dr. Forsstrom retired from active practice in May 1945 and passed away while reading his newspaper in August



1945. He is buried in Ocean View Cemetery in Warrenton.

I visited his grave to pay my respects after buying his house. It was a strangely moving experience to find it. Obituaries were published in the front pages of the local paper, Portland and in the entire lower Columbia area.

In my next column, I will explain how to research your house history and recommend

resources to research. Knowing the history of your house makes life in the big old house more rewarding, I promise. If only the walls could talk!

Lauri Serafin is the owner of the Forsstrom House, built in 1914 in Astoria's Shively-McClure Historic District. She can be contacted at ForsstromHouse@gmail.com. You can find more details about her restoration work at theforsstromhouse.com