

COVER STORY

Home sweet holiday home

By **BRIAN BINGAMAN**
Staff Writer

Just like the carolers of yesteryear moving from house to house, so roves the Lansdale Historical Society's fourth annual Holiday History Tour, "Make the Past a Present."

With nine homes in all on this year's tour, there are more places to go to than ever before.

That's why the tour's originator, North Penn Florist owner Margie Booz, recommended allowing two hours to visit and get to each house.

Three of the houses are within walking distance of each other in the Oak Park neighborhood, just outside the Lansdale Borough limits in Hatfield Township.

With an entrance gateway to Oak Boulevard at an unusual angle to Main Street, Lansdale, Oak Park still has a certain mystique, said historical society president Dick Shearer.

"It was probably one of the first planned, subdivided developments in the Greater Philadelphia area," he said.

Oak Park's architect, Harry Richardson, whom Richardson Avenue in Lansdale is named after, designed the tree-laden development in 1912.

The gates, which came from a Montgomery Township mansion that was never built, were added in the 1920s.

"He wanted it to look like it was exclusive. I think he wanted it to look like the house he lived in," said Shearer, noting that Richardson had stipulated that no African Americans or immigrants live there — a common practice at the time.

In fact, Richardson's former residence at 136 Oak Blvd., which was built in 1923, is on the tour.

So are two older Oak Park houses that were built between 1912 and 1915, at 113 Oak Blvd. and 1109 Forrest Ave.

The Slifer family, which operated a general merchandise store at Main and Broad streets, built the house at 113 Oak Blvd., and Shirley Bowen, whose grandfather owned the store, lives there today.

Some of the features of Bowen's home include a pine-cedar stairwell garland with fresh green cymbidium orchids; a sprawling mantle-top, wood-carved creche; an original William Trego painting; a Christmas dinner table setting; and a collection of antique clocks.

"My first husband, that was his first hobby," Bowen said of the timepieces.

Pam Bowen, who lives at the tour house on Forrest Avenue, said there will be a historical display on the history of Oak Park among the holiday finery custom designed by Booz.

In the residence's foyer stands a Christmas tree encircled by a model railroad scene. A battalion of nutcrackers



MARK C. PSORAS/THE REPORTER

A DINING room setting for the dessert course for Christmas dinner is seen above and at right at the home of Shirley Bowen in the Oak Park neighborhood.

stand ready at the windows behind the tree.

To avoid an accident, it's probably smarter to enter Oak Park from Forrest Avenue via Squirrel Lane, rather than the gates at Oak Boulevard.

The oldest house on the tour was built in 1832 at 914 Ridge St. The original structure had only two rooms.

While Raymond Walton of the Clyde S. Walton Inc. family lived there, significant improvements were made to the property where Ridge Street comes to a dead end. The ceilings are low and you may have to duck so that you don't bump your head entering the house.

Ellen Faw, who lives in the house today, said that although the residence is haunted, a medium has assured her that the spirits are content.

Each of the windows at the front of the house bears a wreath and greens overflow from the window garden basins. Both stories of the house will be decorated, Booz said.

The other homes to visit have contrasting histories: An expanded Cape Cod house at 257 Highland Ave.; a 19th century twin home at 201-203 S. Line St.; and 621 York Ave., which is a newer house nestled in an older neighborhood.



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According to Booz, there will be live holiday music in most of the homes during tour hours.

Proceeds benefit the Lansdale Historical Society's Jenkins Homestead restoration project of the master bedroom and the completion of other room renovations.



MARK C. PSORAS/THE REPORTER

A TABLE centerpiece with hydrangeas and pine in a shell in the living room of Pam Bowen in the Oak Park neighborhood.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Holiday History Tour.

WHEN: 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturday.

WHERE: Start at the Jenkins Homestead, 137 Jenkins Ave., Lansdale, to get a map, a tour booklet and tickets, if you don't already have them.

TICKETS: \$15.

INFO: Call Lansdale Borough at (215) 855-9258 or the Lansdale Historical Society at (215) 855-1872. Also visit www.lansdale.org or www.lansdalehistory.org.

You'll be able to see what came of the funds raised from last year's tour in the children's bedroom, which will be open to the public for the first time.

Advance tickets are being sold at North Penn Florist, 29 W. Main St.; Lansdale Borough Hall, 1 Vine St.; and the Jenkins Homestead. Tickets will also go on sale at 9 a.m. Saturday at the Jenkins Homestead.

The society's collection of 12 community program DVDs will also be for sale for holiday gift giving.

The tour comes the day after the borough's tree lighting and the day before Merry TubaChristmas concert.

"The three things make a great weekend for the borough," said Booz, who added that the weather is predicted to be pleasant Saturday.