

The Home at the Heart of Moraine Hills by Steve Domski

with assistance from Urban Comes & Cheryl Grelle
(photos graciously provided from the Comes family archives)

Moraine Hills State Park's office and visitor center sits on top of a hill, graced by a beautiful view of Lake Defiance, a small 48 acre lake at the north end of the park. Inside it houses a small nature museum and office space for the staff. It also serves as the park's information hub. The park took this structure over in the 1970's, but I've found it had quite a life, long before that.



Dr. Comes' grandchildren: Arlene, Cheryl, Urban #4 and little Lynette

In late August of 2014, Judy Wooderson and I had the rare opportunity to sit down and talk with Urban Walker Comes and his sister Cheryl Comes Grelle, who actually spent a lot of time growing up in this house. They are two of the four grandchildren of the original owners, Dr. Urban Volpert Comes and Alice Thonneson Comes. It became quite evident that they were a close knit family. With every old photo they showed us, there was a story to bring the past back to life. It was a different time without the distractions of hi-tech or busy schedules. They have been left with many meaningful memories of their grandparents, the house, and it's beautiful surroundings.

There is an interesting story behind the old building and the land around it but, to tell it, we have to go back a few years. So let me begin...

The year was 1910. Urban Volpert Comes was a young man of 20. He was a tall, slender, brown-haired German native of Chicago and a very well-spoken, intelligent man. At this time he was a medical student at the University of Illinois and still serving time in the Illinois National Guard Infantry. Alice was a fair-haired girl of 18 and was of Norwegian decent. She, too, lived in Chicago but her parents owned a summer cottage in Mineral Springs, along the Fox River. Now, as you can imagine, the sights and sounds of 1910 in McHenry were quite different than today. Most of what you might experience was what Mother Nature conjured up and maybe the distant sound of a cow's moo, a hunter's shot gun blast in a near-by field, or the moan of a lonesome train whistle. The primary mode of transportation was still the horse-drawn wagon or carriage, with the railroad being the long distance carrier. The Fox Chain and McHenry area were becoming a vacation spot for many people coming from Chicago by way of rail. As the trains came into the stations, they were met by busses, which were actually horse-drawn carriages with multiple seats to pick up and deliver the train passengers to their hotels or resorts.

One can only imagine how young Alice lured Urban away from the city to explore this beautiful countryside. Perhaps they went on a hike or followed meandering dirt roads through prairies and found their way to that hill overlooking Lake Defiance. Perhaps Alice had been to this spot before with her family and wanted to share its peacefulness with Urban. However it happened, this is where they ended up that day. It was then that Alice expressed to Urban her love for this spot. In response to Alice, Urban promised to buy it for her one day.

Well, two years later on the 4th of July, 1912 Urban and Alice eloped. They boarded a steamship heading across Lake Michigan to St. Joseph, Michigan where they were married. The couple were a little uneasy about their families knowing about their marriage because Urban's family was German and Alice's was Norwegian. Back then, marrying outside of your nationality was not always easily accepted. So after the marriage, they went back to their families, keeping the marriage a secret for several months. That had to really mess up the thought of having a honeymoon! But, as they say, "all's well that ends well." The families did accept each other and blessed the union of Urban and Alice.

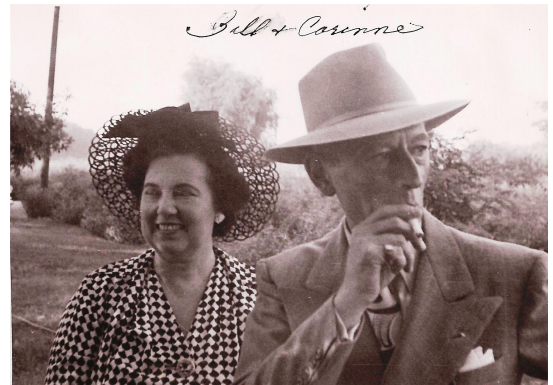
After finishing medical school, Urban was a physician-surgeon and went to the Quad Cities to work for the Burlington Railroad, treating railroad workers who were stricken with small pox. He contracted the disease himself and almost died. Not long after, the couple decided it was time to move on. As luck would have it, the doctor found an ad in a medical journal that had a doctor's office and pharmacy for sale in Bath, Illinois, located along the Illinois River. Dr. Comes was already a pharmacist while in medical school, so it was a perfect opportunity.

The year was now 1914. To put the time period in perspective, Dr. Comes was the first person to own an automobile in Bath. Cheryl also told a humorous story about the birth of her father, Urban Bernard Comes, which also reflects the time period. He was delivered by Dr. Comes at home and weighed only three pounds. Lacking an incubator, the doctor incubated the new born baby in the oven! As you can imagine, life back then was laced with a little of know-how and a lot of luck. The doctor delivered quite a few babies in Bath and years later, the first name of "Urban" started showing up on mailboxes. It seems that some of the parents had named their babies after Dr. Comes as a gesture of appreciation. It's not hard to believe that everyone in town knew him.



About three years later, the family moved to Chicago, where Dr. Comes went to work at Illinois Masonic Hospital. After a few successful years, the Doctor and Alice were able to put a little money away. The year now was 1923 and Urban, remembering that promise he had made to Alice while dating back in 1910, returned to McHenry to buy that hill overlooking Lake Defiance plus some 80 adjoining acres. He built a one-room cottage there. The following year, 1924, Dr. Comes incorporated an 18-lot subdivision on a portion of the property, which was named "Dr. Comes, Lake Defiance Subdivision". It was located on the hillside just across the road from the Comes home (the current park office/visitor center) with one lot on the same side as the Comes home. The road at this time was called Hillside Trail, which in reality probably was just that! To get access to the property, one would have to traverse through a series of at least seven pastures and gates, gaining entrance off of Route 120. Later, in the 1930's, the doctor had a gravel road put in off of Lily Lake Road, which joined Hillside Trail. It was renamed "Comes Trail." The stone pillars, which once marked the entrance to the property, can

still be seen along Lily Lake Road. Homes were built on only a few of the lots. These lots were sold to friends and family members. One lot, which was on the highest part of the hillside, was referred to as "Pikes Peak." The name came from Bill (William) Comes, Dr. Comes' only sibling. "Uncle Bill," as he was referred to by the grandkids, resided there for many years with his wife, Corinne. Brothers Urban and Bill were always close. Urban didn't just care for patients, but also made it a practice to look after his family and friends, especially his brother.



Although I'm trying to follow a timeline of events, I'd like to jump forward to the 1950's for a moment to throw in a little side note about "Uncle Bill." In the 50's, Bill Comes operated the Town Club Tavern in downtown McHenry on Pearl Street and Riverside Drive. The building served as the first McHenry County Court House before the county seat was moved to Woodstock back in 1844. The old court house was then auctioned off to Horace Long, who converted it to a hotel & tavern. Moraine Hills State park has a historical connection to Horace Long, as well. In around 1836, Horace was the first know settler within the present day park. He homesteaded in an area just down the road from the Comes home site. By the way, you can still stop in and get a drink at that same tavern that once belonged to Horace.

So while Dr. Comes' property progressed, Dr. Comes continued working at the hospital down in the city. Then, in 1928, Dr. Comes and two other physicians become co-founders of Belmont Community Hospital in Chicago, where he also served as the hospital's president. Unfortunately, the Great Depression was looming just around the corner, with the stock market crash of 1929. The hospital was forced to go from a private hospital to a non-profit institution just to stay afloat. Times were hard for everyone, with high unemployment putting many on the brink of losing everything. This would last until the early 40's. Now was a good time to buy real-estate, if you had the money. That is



what Dr. Comes did. In the late 30's, he bought more property to the east. One parcel came with a farmhouse and a few out-buildings that backed up along Lily Lake Road. Today, this is the White Tail Prairie area. Then it was known as the Urbandale Poultry Farm. A big barn was built and the doctor bought animals ranging from chickens to mules. Dr. Comes also bought a lot of farm equipment, but he was no farmer! He left the running of the farm to someone else. His brother took on the task for awhile and, at times, some of it was rented out. The farm became identified as a dairy farm and the name changed to Urbandale Farm. In retrospect, people who were compelled to sell property to get out of debt during the depression were lucky to find someone to buy it. So the sellers were often times making out as well as the buyers. It was probably a smart move by the doctor to own a farm because no one knew how long the depression would last. With a farm, your family would never starve. Notably, Urban and Alice felt they were blessed with a rich life and were there for the whole family anytime they needed help.



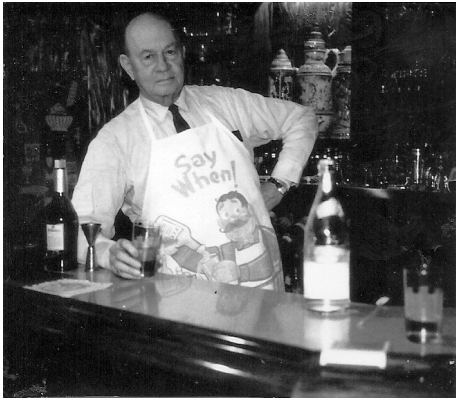
Between the mid-30's and early 40's, some additions were made to the Comes home. Initially, they added a large room with a stone fireplace and two small bedrooms. You can see the large living room pictured in the wedding photo. It was about this time, during WWII, that the Comes family moved out to the house full time. Their son, Urban Bernard Comes, was going off to war, like so many other sons and daughters. On a furlough from his training as a 10th Mountain Infantry ski trooper, he and Bessie Walker were married in that living room on January 6, 1944. The room had a vaulted ceiling with knotty pine walls and the grand fireplace was made of fieldstone. This room now serves as our main nature exhibit area. In the past, this room was the heart of the house. I feel that there will always be the spirit of the family's togetherness in this great room.

The next phase of construction added a formal dining room, as well as a large second-story bedroom directly above. The east side of the building shows the somewhat curved design of this addition. At this time, indoor plumbing was also added. However, the grandchildren recall that they were still sent to the outdoor privy!

In the early 50's, Dr. Comes retired from medicine and, with the two other co-founding doctors of the Belmont Hospital, decided to sell their interests in the institution. Shortly after his retirement, the doctor and two other gentlemen started McHenry Savings and Loan Bank, where he served as its first president. I guess Dr. Comes wasn't going to let any dust settle on him. The early 50's was also when the last addition was added to the Comes house. This addition included what has now become the main office for the park. This part of the house looks much the same as it did back then. The Comes family used this room for dining because of the big picture windows and the view of the lake. If you look above the fireplace, you'll notice two large flat gray stones. Dr. Comes purchased these stones from the White House in 1951. Harry Truman, President at that time, was renovating the White House. Stones from the original White House foundation were removed and made available for sale to the general public. There is a small plaque in the center of one stone that states its origin. No doubt, the Comes family had a strong appreciation for this country and its great history.

During this last building phase, the grandchildren often got in the way of the construction workers, as they now had become part of the landscape, so to speak. The grandchildren "entertained" the workers with dance and song. At times they were asked to sing "Far, far, away!" "Far away" might have meant playing in an old abandoned chicken coop on the property, which became Cheryl's favorite playhouse. It's not often you get an opportunity like that! Between horsing around at the farm, swimming and fishing in the lake, berry-picking, playing with visiting friends and more, life there was never boring! Dr. Comes was known as a great storyteller with a quick sense of humor. He and Alice must have been fun people to be around. Their grandchildren dearly loved them. There is no doubt that the house was full of life with the young ones around, and I'm sure the young ones put a little more life back into the old ones!

In our recent meeting with Cheryl, she was a bit dismayed that the concrete entryway to the house has been replaced. She explained that her footprint was imprinted in the concrete of the original entryway, along with the footprints of her siblings.

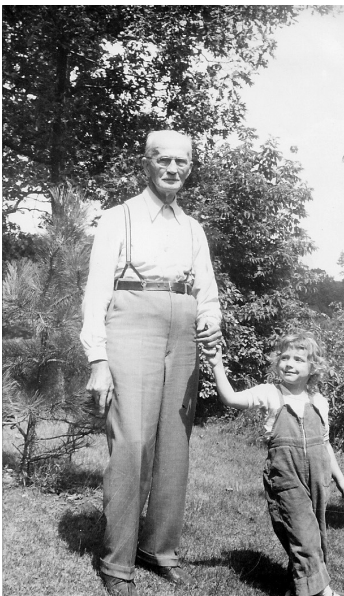


Also, during this last building phase, Dr. Comes built a Rathskeller, which is German for basement, tavern or bar. This was his pride and joy. The walls were paneled in a dark stained wood and the back of the bar was lined with a collection of beer steins. In the center of the terrazzo floor is a big "C" for Comes. Minus the bar and the German decor, the room remains the same today. One can only imagine the good times had there. Adjacent to the Rathskeller was another room, which Alice designed. This room had a Mexican motif, highlighted by Mexican tile that Alice had purchased when visiting Arizona. The room provided extra space for eating and was sometimes used as a playroom by the children. Off of this room was another small spare bedroom.

Four or five years after the sale of the hospital, the waters started getting choppy for the Comes family. You might think what could come along and derail this blossoming story.

Well, try the IRS! Yes, the government came along and hit them up for 30 years of back taxes and penalties. It was bad enough that the federal government got involved but, once the state got wind of it, they wanted their share too. Despite all the legal advice and paperwork to secure the sale of the hospital, something fell through the cracks, or somebody made cracks for things to fall through! After ten years of legal battles Dr. Comes was forced to re-mortgage the property to pay for the taxes. It is true that bad things do happen to good people.

In the early 60's Dr. Comes and Alice moved to Florida and rented out the house for 3 or 4 years before they were forced to sell it. The property was sold once on contract in 1965 but the buyer defaulted on payments and the property reverted back to the Comes family. It later sold at a higher price, which made for a little better ending. It's believed that a mining or gravel company bought the property, although I have not been able to confirm it myself. What I do know is the Illinois Building Authority condemned the property in 1971 and granted it over to the Department of Conservation. By good fortune, the Comes home was the only one that was not demolished.



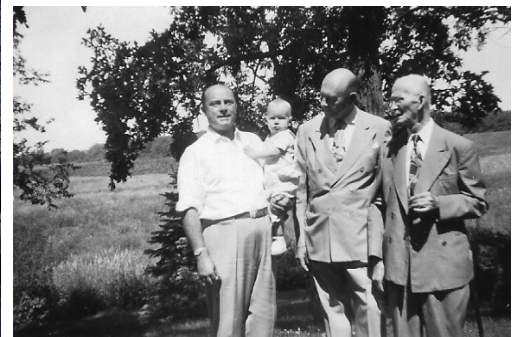
Urban Wilhelm Comes & great granddaughter Cheryl 1950

Doctor Comes died in Florida in 1969 at the age of 80. Alice moved back to Illinois shortly after Urban's death. Alice died in 1991 at the age of 99.

I only know Doctor Comes and Alice through the stories of their grandchildren Urban W. and Cheryl, but I can see they touched a lot of lives and spread a lot of joy while sharing their American Dream. After writing this story, this old building we call the park office/visitor center seems a lot more like a home.



The completed Comes home 1955



Four generations of Urbans



Dr. Urban V., Alice & son Urban B. Comes 1930's



Dr. Comes welcoming guests



Family Urbandale 1930's



Entrance to Urbandale Farm off of Lily Lake Road



Arlene & Cheryl enjoying Lake Defiance 1952



Family & friends on the beach



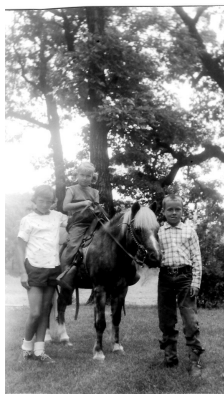
1955 Completed Comes Home - Fireplace with Stones from the White House



Urban B. and Bessie Comes 1943



Arlene, Marie, Cheryl, and Vicki



Pony Dusty



Dr. Comes with grandson Urban



Urban B., Bessie, Cheryl and Urban W.