

Montauk Today

A Victorian house still alive with activity

The peonies, planted in 1875, still bloom every spring. Guests still walk the grounds, admiring the bronze statues. Music drifts through the house occasionally, the sounds of the grand piano or Swiss music box.

Montauk still bustles with activity. The historic site, administered by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is a popular destination for schoolchildren and tourists. Entering through the arched doors with the etched glass into the spacious hall with the grand staircase, visitors step into the daily life of a wealthy 19th-century family.

Nadine West, Montauk museum guide for nearly 20 years, works with docents and volunteers to create activities illustrative of Victorian life. Pressing apples for cider and carving pumpkins attract visitors in the fall, as do making wreaths and gingerbread houses in the early winter, or touring the rooms when they're decorated for the holiday open house. Teas, picnics, concerts, and outdoor games like croquet and horse-shoes are planned for the summers. Vegetables are harvested from the garden (and donated to the local food bank). Occasional programs on etiquette, weddings, and mourning explain Victorian customs. Down the hill in Clermont, recitals at the Union Sunday School fill the small building with the splendid sounds of the Kimball pipe organ and fill the pews with appreciative listeners.

Montauk is staffed by West and Vern Oakland and

seasonal docents. In addition, dedicated individuals and local organizations — Clermont's community club and historical society, the Arlington Garden Club, Master Gardeners, and chapters of Questers, 4-H, and Future Farmers of America — have all contributed time and funds to make Montauk one of the star attractions in northeast Iowa.

Anna Appelman Larrabee loved to have a house full of people. She would be happy to know that today her beloved Montauk still attracts guests, 130 years after it was built. Consider this your personal invitation!

—by Ginalie Swaim

Visitor Information

Montauk is open noon–4 p.m. daily, Memorial Day weekend through October 31. Open other times by special arrangement for group tours or special events. Volunteer opportunities are available. Contact Montauk Site Manager, Box 372, Clermont, IA 52135. Phone 563-423-7173. E-mail: montauk@acegroup.cc. Check www.iowahistory.org for updates and special events. Montauk is on U.S. 18, one mile northeast of Clermont, in Fayette County.

NOTE ON SOURCES FOR "THE LARRABEES OF MONTAUK" BY MARY BENNETT (PAGES 2-43)

All photographs in this issue are from the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa. Several biographical sketches and tributes relating to William Larrabee exist but little has been written about the rest of the family. Grandchild Helen Augusta Larrabee wrote "The Story of My Grandmother," about Anna Appelman Larrabee, as part of a high school essay contest sponsored by the State Historical Society of Iowa in 1923 and had it published in a little booklet. Ruth Gallaher wrote about the family in an article, "From Connecticut to Iowa," in *The Palimpsest* (March 1941). Also useful was a memorial address by U.S. Senator William S. Kenyon given before the state legislature when Larrabee died in 1912, and published as *William Larrabee* (Cedar Rapids: Torch Press, 1913). More recently, Rebecca Christian's profile of the Larrabees and Montauk appeared in the *The Iowan* (Winter 1983). *Echoes from the Valley: Stories from Clermont and Elgin* (1999) offers excerpts from oral history interviews of the townspeople and rural dwellers in the Turkey River Valley. It provided some clues about the servants, as did Lisa Chensvold's May 31, 1984, article, "Nora Askleson [sic] is former Montauk employee," in the *Fayette County Union*. Henry Follett, longtime caretaker of Montauk, recognized the value of recording the oral tradition that had been passed down to him from various family members and local residents by publishing *Clermont Vignettes* in 1998; many of the gems in the article came from stories in his book. Information about the house was partially derived from the "Montauk Historic Resources Management Plan," issued by the state's historic preservation office in 1978. Museum guide Nadine West and volunteers have transcribed selected letters and written materials from the

Larrabee Papers, which were also useful. For a basic introduction to Victorian interiors, see William Seale's *The Tasteful Interlude: American Interiors Through the Camera's Eye, 1860-1917* (New York: Praeger, 1975).

The author, Special Collections Coordinator at the State Historical Society of Iowa, wishes to thank Joyce Giaquinta for making it possible for a young archivist to discover how magically a sense of the past could be transmitted through photographs. Some information came from an informal oral history the author conducted with Julia Robbins Allen in 1978 in order to properly identify some of the photographs and document family history.

Serious scholars will find research possibilities in the Larrabee Papers housed at the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City and Des Moines, and at Montauk in Clermont. The contents range from family and political correspondence to documentation of household furnishings and travel accounts. A portion of these extensive papers (primarily correspondence) are now united in a set of 17 rolls of microfilm (thanks to the efforts of archivist Matt Schaefer and others) and can be borrowed via interlibrary loan. Annotations to the manuscript are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City).

This piece relied on the creativity and collaboration of two important individuals, Chuck Greiner, who brought the house to life through his artistic photographs, and editor Ginalie Swaim, who composed lovely, descriptive captions. Her deft touch with words and gentle way of encouraging authors have been invaluable.