

Local business owner keeps building's historical past intact and on display

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A mysterious part of Bracebridge's past is now on display to the public.

"It needed a lot of work, but I realized that it was so historically significant that I should probably open it up to the public, and try to do as little as possible to change the structure," said Elise Boyer.

Boyer's store, Veranda, now sits in the lower level of the former Odd Fellows Hall. According to their website, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows began in 1819 to assist the community of Baltimore, Maryland deal with a yellow fever outbreak and large-scale unemployment.

"Such altruistic and friendly society came to be known as 'Odd Fellows' because it was odd to find people organized for the purpose of giving aid to those in need and of pursuing projects for the benefit of all mankind."

When Boyer bought the building from the last of the remaining Bracebridge members in September 2014, she decided to do what she could to retain its history.

"They closed their chapter due to lack of membership," she said.

"What I wanted to do is make sure that I didn't ruin this room, so that one day it can be a meeting hall again, it can be a dance hall, it can be anything. It's just one nice big space that's not been ruined. I care about the history," she said.

According to documents Boyer now owns, the Bracebridge Odd Fellows chapter was born in 1886. The meeting hall was constructed for the group in 1904, and remained in use until Boyer bought it.

When the sale went through, a number of items were left behind by the disbanded club, including a stage marked 1886 on the bottom, benches bearing Odd Fellow insignia, blue velvet upholstered chairs believed to be from their sister organization the Rebekahs, a 1900 Gerhard Heintzman piano and a number of wooden doors with intricate details.

"I had an antique dealer in here and he just went crazy about this door and I said well, it's not for sale," she said.



Elise Boyer, owner of Veranda, stands with the 115 year old piano left behind in the building she purchased from the Odd Fellows



Elise Boyer had the tin ceiling of the Odd Fellows Hall restored and painted white. (Photo by Lisa Gillan)

Another elaborate feature of the space is the tin ceiling, restored by Doug Marshall and his crew at Perfection Muskoka, along with painter Alex Hymers from A and J Painting.

“We remodelled the downstairs ceiling probably about eight years ago and then Alex from A and J painting, she ... told Elise that when she wanted to do the upstairs that we’re the ones that did the downstairs,” Marshall said.

Marshall said tackling the tin ceiling was his favourite part about this restoration project.

“Because we don’t get to play with tin ceilings anymore ... But to be able to pull it all down, cause it was smashed, and it’s got 12-inch crown mouldings — they had them all like bent right back against themselves — so to be able to pull all those panels down and bang them all back out, get the profiles all lining back up again, reinstall them and then have the challenge of, you’re short 80 panels so you have to find 80 new panels that will kind of match the room and no one will know that it wasn’t like that before,” he said.

Marshall’s crew also worked on a number of other elements including baseboards, door trims and a large doorway installed from the original store level to the stairs.

“Most people, when they’re opening up a store, it’s just do it the cheapest way possible, and Elise was really adamant about, it had to match the architecture of the original state of the building, not just slap something up,” he said.

The tin ceiling starts in the stair hall leading to the second level, and continues throughout the second storey showroom, where the majority of the Odd Fellows memorabilia can be found.

Although the Bracebridge chapter has closed, according to their website, almost 10,000 Odd Fellow and Rebekah branches still exist around the world.

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It wasn't in good enough shape to keep up, but Elise Boyer held onto some of the original wallpaper from the Odd Fellows hall.



Elise Boyer also has a few chairs from the Odd Fellows' sister organization The Rebekahs.



A pair of old shoes sit stuck in tar in a cubby on the way to the roof of the old Odd Fellows building.



Tin tiles from the ceiling were in need of straightening and a fresh coat of paint when Elise Boyer bought the building from the Odd Fellows.



Elise Boyer holds a document from builder D. Sweetman who worked on the Odd Fellows hall in 1904.



The original stairs, ceiling and handrail leading to the former Odd Fellows hall have been fixed up and now lead to Veranda's second storey showroom.



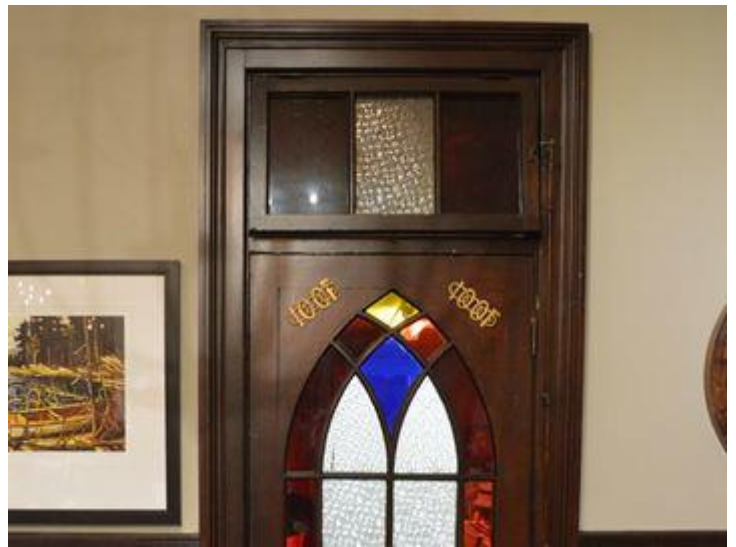
The doorknobs of the original doors in the former Odd Fellows hall are just one of the many treasures still standing in what is now Veranda.



Visitors to the Odd Fellows hall were greeted through a peep holes which remain in two of the original doors of the former Odd Fellows hall.



The International Order of Odd Fellows logo is displayed on one of the original doors still standing in the former Odd Fellows hall.



A door bearing the International Order of Odd Fellows logo still stands in the second storey Veranda showroom.



A divided bench bearing Odd Fellows insignia sits on display in Veranda.



One of the original doors left behind in the Odd Fellows hall now leads to Veranda's second storey show room.



A stage left behind in the old Odd Fellows hall is dated as having been constructed in the 1800's.



ODD BELL. This rare bell was found on the doors in the old Independent order of Odd Fellows Lodge #251 on 24 Manitoba Street in the attic. (Photo by Bev McMullen)



PEEP SHOW. Elise Boyer peeps through the secret peep hole to the interior of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Lodge #251 in the attic of her new store Veranda on 24 Manitoba Street. Henderson-Ames Regalia Makers of Kalamazoo, Michigan supplied lodges and secret societies with uniforms, ceremonial swords and brass peep holes as the one found in the stained glass doors in her attic. The attic has stages and furniture and historic tin roof and will be part of the design store. (Photo by Bev McMullen)



WHAT'S THE PASSWORD. This Henderson-Ames brass peep hole is part of their regalia makers line of ceremonial items for secret societies and was out of Kalamazoo, Michigan. The history of the company is worthy of a book and its scandals. The peep hole was found in the attic of the old 1892 Independent Order of Odd Fellows Lodge #251 which closed last year after 120 years in town. The new owner Elise Boyer owner of Veranda plans to revamp the attic and add the space to her design store on 24 Manitoba Street. Ceremonial swords and regalia are now in the possession of an antique store in Rosseau. (Photo by Bev McMullen)



SECRET IN THE ATTIC. Elise Boyer new owner of the 1892 Independent Order of Odd Fellows Lodge #251 Bracebridge opens the attic door to a wealth of treasure from the Henderson-Ames Co. regalia makers, ceremonial swords, flags, now collector items for lodges and secret societies. The I.O.O. F. Hall had peep holes in the doors with this company's logo on it and regalia and swords were found in the attic along with Odd Fellow stage and benches. The great stained glass doors and memorabilia will be part of the Veranda Store display area. (Photo by Bev McMullen)