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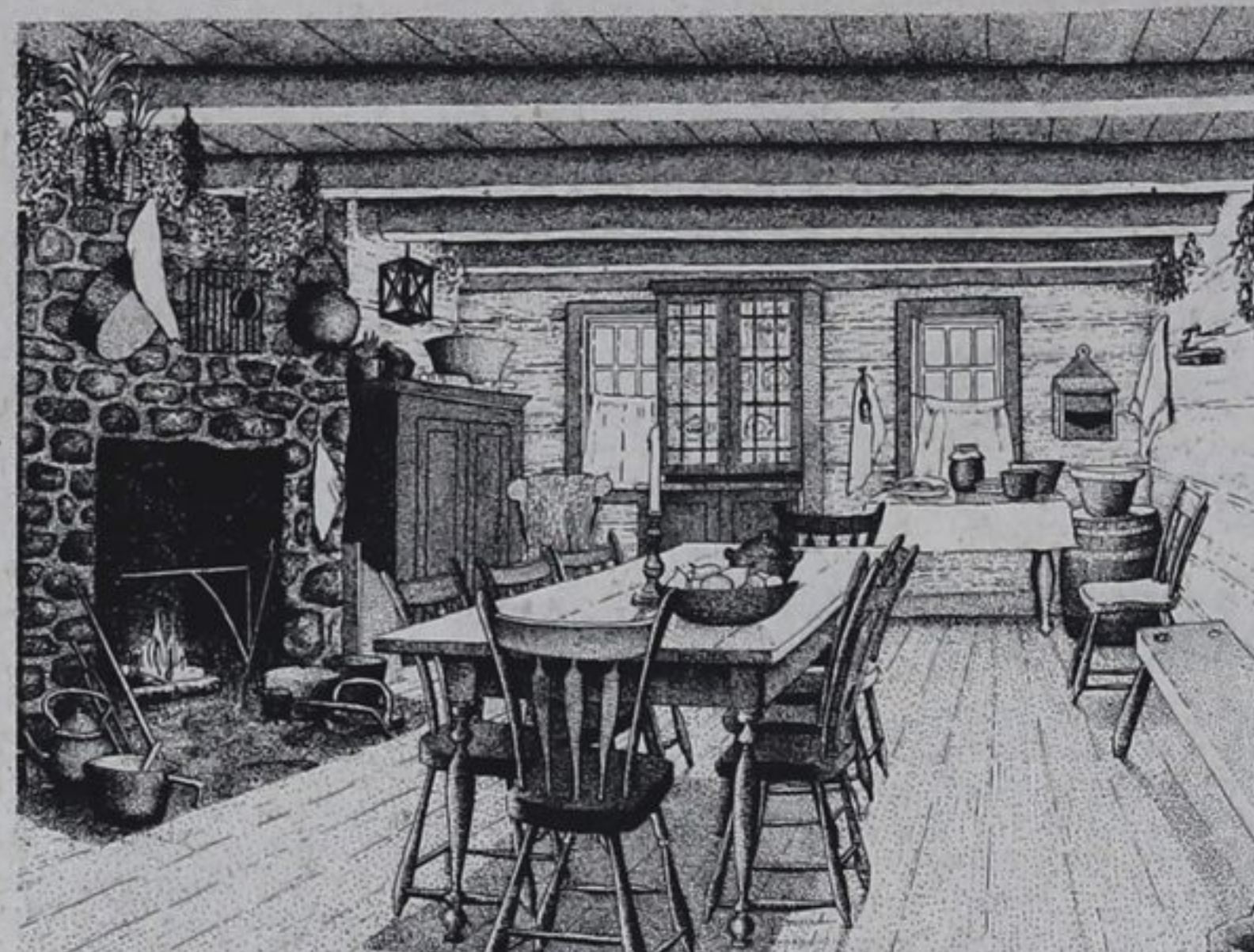
DOWNTOWN MIDLAND

Designer offers advice on recreating warmth and history of the past

by Shirley Whittington
Dorothy Duncan is a detective who specializes in tracking down the personalities of some of Ontario's most historic and venerable buildings. She's a Museum's Advisor for the Heritage Administrative Branch of the Ministry of Culture and Recreation, and offers wise and seasoned advice on how to recreate the warmth and history of the past.

Visitors to Fort York in Toronto, Old Fort William at the Lakehead, and the Naval and Military Establishments at Penetanguishene have felt the touch of history recreated in the gleam of pewter, the warmth of hand woven rugs underfoot, and the homely charm of furnishings that are exactly right for the period.

The search for correct period furnishings is never dull and sometimes provides delightful surprises, like the time Dorothy walked into an antique shop in Toronto. "I have something here that will interest you."



Carole Richards sketch, Duncan interior 'Keating house, British Naval and Military Establishments, Penetanguishene

said the proprietor. "It's a plate warmer that might be suitable for Fort York." He added that he thought it had originally come from Penetanguishene. It happened that

Penetanguishene was Dorothy's current project. She grabbed the warming cabinet, and it can be seen today, returned to its original position before the huge fireplace in the stone Officers' Quarters on the shores of Penetanguishene Bay.

Most of the Penetanguishene buildings have been reconstructed according to original Admiralty plans. The plans, alas, included no detail about how they were furnished and decorated, and this is where Dorothy Duncan's combination of sleuthing genius and intuition came in.

"We know that officers brought tons of furniture with them when they came out to a posting like Penetanguishene," says Dorothy. "Very few lists exist, but we assume that a man would bring his desk, his favourite chair, his books."

Sometimes a detail from a diary or a letter provides a tantalizing hint. One officer wrote that he had put "rugs" on his floor to keep out the draughts. "But at that

time," says Dorothy, "a rug could mean a blanket or a carpet. I think he meant carpet, and that's what I've put down."

Diary-keepers are the darlings of restoration experts. The Gibson house in North York was one of Dorothy's projects. "Gibson was a surveyor who kept a daily journal as part of his work. Fortunately, he included personal glimpses. One entry mentions that he had put up the pipes for his stoves. And on that evidence, we included a couple of stoves in the restoration."

In Penetanguishene, some officers brought their wives with them, and a new dimension entered the picture. "We have to give those wives a personality, and we then infuse the house with that personality. What sort of women would have lived here? Did she like to collect things? Did she sew? Would she care if everything matched?"

Other clues are picked up from diaries and letters written by people in the community. "The Misses Hallam, in Penetanguishene mention going to a ball at the Officers' Quarters. Not much to go on, but it gives us an idea of the activities that went on there."

Dorothy Duncan is frequently approached as a consultant on the restoration of existing buildings. Her battle plan is impressive.

"First I listen to all the local folklore about the place," she says, "and then I put it completely out of my mind. The first thing you learn in this business is never to take

anything for granted."

An exterior tour of the building provides clues about architectural deletions and additions. "We look for anything unusual - a row of different bricks, a patch in the wall, a difference in wood around doors and windows."

Inside, sleuthing continues. "There may be a patch of new plaster - why? Or a bulge in the floor, worn stair treads, or a scrap of wall paper, hidden behind a baseboard."

Simultaneously, somebody is out digging in archives registry offices, and libraries. "Why did the taxes on the property go up suddenly? What families lived in the building? Did they have children? Animals?"

From there, the search goes on for diaries, and genealogical information which give the house its character.

Meanwhile, Dorothy continues her interior work peeling down as many as eleven layers of paint to find out the original colour, lifting linoleum to find out what was underfoot, determining if a staircase had been moved, and why.

Two important decisions must be made before work can progress. "We decide on a Terminal Date, which just means what period in that building's life was most important. And we find out how the site is to be interpreted. This is important. I'm working now on a building which after restoration is to be used as a centre for the teaching of crafts. I'm suggesting that they not furnish with too many priceless antiques. Reproductions would be much more practical here."

Then the reconstruction begins. Modernities like the oil furnace are removed and invisible electric ceiling heating is installed. Obvious electric lighting fixtures are taken out.

Notices are sent out to selected antique dealers ("Those who have an interest beyond merely buying and selling") and the search begins for the kind of furniture and accessories that Dorothy feels would be right for that particular house.

"I am also aware of what museums have in their store rooms," she says, "and we may borrow pieces from private collectors."

Then, with the aid of floor plans, and sometimes scale models, the rooms are put together. The hallmark of Dorothy Duncan's work is the feeling of warmth and reality which transports the visitor instantly into times beyond his experience. There are open books, half written letters, and ink tipped pens lying on tables. There may be bunches of herbs tied near the doorway ("People used to think that they kept the flies away") or piles of fresh vegetables on the kitchen table. There may be open sewing cases, and articles

Cont'd on p.9

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