

THE OUILMETTE HERITAGE

Newsletter of the Wilmette Historical Society

THE STRANGE JOURNEY OF BEN MARSHALL'S APOLLO

One day this past fall we got an email from Susan Young of the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History in Springdale, Arkansas. Did we know anything about a statue of the Greek god Apollo that might once have decorated a big mansion in Wilmette? We didn't, but agreed to do some investigating. In the process we filled in some missing pieces of a fascinating story.



Apollo statue detail, 2013. Photo courtesy of Richard Wommack II

The story begins in the Roaring Twenties, when famed Chicago architect Benjamin Marshall roamed the world seeking treasures to decorate his astonishingly elaborate mansion and studio overlooking Wilmette Harbor. An Egyptian mummy's case, Greek and Roman sculptures, the 500-year-old bed of a Chinese princess – hundreds of rare and beautiful objects like these helped to make 612 Sheridan Road one of the world's great showcases, where princes and movie stars came to marvel and to party. In 1936, undone by the Depression, Marshall sold the house and everything in it to Nathan Goldblatt, the department store magnate, who added the contents of his own art collection. A dozen years later, Goldblatt's widow moved out of the house and a month-long auction was held to dispose of its contents.

Tipped off about the auction, Dallas Barrack, a furniture and antiques dealer in Springdale, Arkansas, headed for Wilmette. He liked what he saw, trucking back home a big lot of furniture but also, as noted in an article about Barrack in the *North Arkansas Times*, a "marble statue of Apollo" that "had stood looking down on the fabulous ornamentation of the Goldblatt living room" (8/25/1948). Just over five feet in height, it weighed some 800 lbs. *continued on page 3*

UPCOMING EVENTS

Annual Meeting & Lecture Vivian Maier, Photographer

Sunday, January 26, 2014

2:00 - 3:30 p.m.

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Workshop Preserving Family Keepsakes

Sunday, February 23, 2014

2:00 - 4:00 p.m.

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Program for Kids Drawing Your House

Sunday, March 2, 2014

2:00 - 3:30 p.m.

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Lecture & Discussion Hidden Children of the Holocaust Tell Their Stories

Sunday, March 9, 2014

2:00 - 3:30 p.m.

See page 5

Program for Kids Junior Architects

Sunday, April 27, 2014

1:30 - 4:00 p.m.

See page 5

History Book Club

3rd Monday of each month,

7:30 p.m. at the Museum, 609 Ridge Road

See website for current list of books

For more news, visit our

website: www.wilmettehistory.org

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Apollo Theater in Springdale, Arkansas, 1950. Reproduced by courtesy of the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History / Maudine Sanders Collection

At about the same time, William Sonneman, the owner of several theaters in that part of the state, had begun construction on his finest theater yet, in downtown Springdale. One day in 1949, shortly before the theater was to open, someone told him about the statue of Apollo in Barrack's store. He rushed down to buy it, installed it in the lobby, and named his little movie palace after it: the Apollo Theater. The nearly naked Greek figure greeted moviegoers for the next 25 years; just about everybody from Springdale who is over about 50 years old has fond memories of "the Apollo statue."

After William Sonneman died in 1969, the theater changed hands. The new owner and his projectionist got into trouble with local authorities in the early 1970s for showing X-rated movies at the Apollo. Attorney Richard Wommack represented them, but they were fined heavily, and couldn't pay their lawyer in cash. Wommack wound up with the statue in lieu of payment, and, until recently, Apollo graced the top landing of the staircase of his grand home on Lover's Lane in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

We learned the Arkansas part of this story from Susan Young, but could we confirm the Wilmette part? We had the dealer's catalog for that 1948 auction, but it has few pictures, and only one listing for an object that might be the statue. Moreover, it is impossible to tell from the catalog which items were original to the Marshall house, and which were added by Nathan Goldblatt. Luckily, the current owner, Richard Wommack II, was glad to send us some snapshots of the statue, which for the past year or so has resided in his law office in Nashville, Tennessee. We were able to compare it against photos of the interior of the Marshall home and studio from the archive of Marshall's papers at the Alexander Architectural Archive in Austin, Texas. Sure enough, there it is in a 1925 photo, confirming that Marshall himself selected it for his home.



The Apollo statue (circled) in Benjamin Marshall's home, 1925. Reproduced from the archive of Marshall and Fox, Drawings and Records, by courtesy of the Alexander Architectural Archive, University of Texas at Austin

The razing of the Benjamin Marshall house and studio in 1950 was the greatest architectural tragedy in the history of Chicago's North Shore. Of all the treasures that once filled that magnificent structure, none has ever resurfaced – until now. Richard Wommack II, who has retrieved the statue from his childhood home, feels that he must part with it soon. The next journey of Ben Marshall's Apollo is anyone's guess.

Patrick Leary