

Pieces of the past come to light at Habitat for Humanity demolition sites

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As a Habitat for Humanity volunteer, Dave Kurtz was helping renovate a house on Meridan Street in South Buffalo back in 1991. Kurtz was knowledgeable about construction, but on that day, he discovered something that gave him pause.

“The house was near the finished stage, and I was working on the stairs,” recalled Kurtz, now 81. “All of a sudden, I noticed the riser was loose. I pulled on it, and out popped a drawer. It was a concealed safe, so secure that none of the other workers had seen it. I just stumbled over it by accident.”

Habitat for Humanity builds several new homes each year in Western New York, but the bulk of jobs involve renovating older houses that have been donated. The first task is removing mundane items former owners have left behind: Couches. Old clothes. Sometimes even crusts of pizza in the oven and spoiled food in the refrigerator.

After the house is emptied, its plaster or drywall is gutted.

“Some houses may have been vacant for 40 years,” said Chuck Drumsta, one of four site supervisors. “We go in and take everything out. It’s ripped right down to the shell, so studs are visible.”

Along the way, history may be revealed.

Receipts, toys, playbills

Drumsta’s eyes light up when he discovers something concealed within the walls. Drumsta, 41, has renovated hundreds of city houses since he began volunteering as a college student in the 1990s. Ten years ago, after living in California, he returned home and was hired full time by Habitat for Humanity. Now he’s on the front lines of preserving history.

An unearthed receipt from 1884, for example, offers a window into life 130 years ago. A homemade slingshot shows what boys played with early in the 20th century. The list of finds is varied: a tape measure. Toy blocks. Glasses. Even a playbill from Shea’s Theater.

“I’ve never encountered a time capsule,” Drumsta said. “Most of what we see is stuff that’s abandoned. Like years ago somebody swept the attic and when they did, remnants fell down into the wall.”

- [*If walls could talk: Items found inside demolition homes \(gallery\)*](#)

Today, workers gather items into a pile and haul them to a dumpster. But Drumsta, with a degree in history and anthropology from the University at Buffalo, has a keen appreciation for the past. He often rescues things from the garbage, assembling an archaeological record of city homes.

“It’s such an interesting part of the work I do,” Drumsta said. “It indicates the significance of what people used. When you lose something, do you miss it? What did it mean to you? If it’s valuable, you don’t leave it behind. In Europe, they talk about the history of a place that’s 500 years old. Buffalo has only been around since 1812, so we’re relatively young.”

Stories from past generations are preserved inside sealed walls. Longtime volunteer Darwin Schmitt, 91, recalled a day years ago when he insulated a crawl space beneath a first-floor bedroom. He discovered glass bottles stamped with a dairy company’s name, recalling an era when milkmen traveled neighborhoods by horse and buggy, delivering fresh milk.

“One bottle had a double top where the cream came up and you could put a spoon inside to scoop it out,” Schmitt said.

From Pan-Am Expo to Meridan Street

Drumsta admits that much of what he finds is junk, but he refers to historical items as “a giant treasure trove.” He recognizes that they have almost no monetary value. He has offered new homeowners the opportunity to retain things discovered on the property, but the answer, almost always, is no thanks.

For Kurtz, a former history teacher, connections to the past are strong.

“On Meridan Street, an older gentleman came by and said that almost every house in the neighborhood was built using lumber from the Pan-American Exposition. When they tore the exposition down, lumber was recycled. It was logical because contractors could buy it cheaply. These houses were constructed using the remnants.”

Drumsta recalled a renovation on Congress Street. Because of the neighborhood and architectural style, he estimates the homes were built in the 1880s.

“There was stuff found there related to musical instruments and song books,” Drumsta said. “I think the woman who lived there must have been a music instructor. If I found this in my house, I’d probably go to town.”

As a caretaker, Drumsta gathers abandoned items in cardboard boxes. He began collecting trinkets with the idea he would create a display case, educating people about Habitat for Humanity. As boxes fill, that showcase has yet to happen.

Some of his co-workers joke about “Chuck’s stuff.” But his personality demonstrates an appreciation for the past.

“I like to find uses for stuff that’s abandoned,” he said. “It’s a contribution I can make. I’m kind of dorky like that.”